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No.122 MAY '94

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BRENT-DYER**

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**T.S. ELIOT**



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PETER  
O'DONNELL'S  
**MODESTY  
BLAISE**



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No.122

MAY 1994

**BOOK AND  
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### IMPORTANT

Every endeavour has been made to ensure that all the information and values published in this magazine are as accurate and up-to-date as possible. Neither the publishers nor their agents can be held responsible for any errors or omissions; nor shall they be liable for any loss or damage to any person acting on the information contained in the magazine. Naturally, the Editor will welcome any corrections at any time.

Book and Magazine Collector is published on the third Friday of each month. Here are the dates for the next two issues:

**ISSUE**

**ADVERTISING DEADLINE**

JUNE ISSUE (on sale 20 May) ..... 19 APRIL

JULY ISSUE (on sale 17 June) ..... 24 MAY

## BRENT-DYER'S CHALET SCHOOL

**S**chool stories continue to attract enormous interest from readers and book collectors. The works of P. G. Wodehouse, Frank Richards and countless other boys' writers are still avidly collected, but it's not simply a male preserve. Their female counterparts are just as popular, and none more so than Elinor M. Brent-Dyer.

The genre is often derided because of its narrowness and predictability, but there's nothing provincial or predictable about Brent-Dyer's 'Chalet' books. For a start, they are mostly set in the Austrian village of Pertisau which the authoress visited in 1924. Nor are they staid or narrow in outlook. A devout Catholic, Brent-Dyer used her novels to express her disgust at war and particularly at the Nazis. In fact, there was quite a storm when, in 1940, one of the books — *The Chalet School in Exile* — was issued in a chilling dustjacket which showed two of the girls being interrogated by an SS officer. The book itself contains a harrowing description of Nazi Jew-baiting, so no one can accuse Brent-Dyer of trying to protect her readers from the horrors of the 'real world'. In our main feature, Martin Spence looks at her remarkable career and assesses the current collectability of the various 'Chalet School' books and related titles.

I doubt whether Elinor Brent-Dyer would have been very impressed with Modesty Blaise, the sultry, gun-toting heroine of eleven novels and countless newspaper strips. When her creator, Peter O'Donnell, was asked to devise a new strip in 1962, he came up with something completely new: a female character with all the skills and toughness of James Bond, but with an essentially feminine outlook. She was an instant hit, and is still going strong over thirty years later, as Michael Richardson explains in his feature.

T. S. Eliot's unhappy relationships with women are the subject of a new film, *Tom and Viv*, which looks at his disastrous first marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood. Towards the end of his life, Eliot said that his poetry had cost him too dearly in experience, and it's clear that he was particularly referring to his difficulties with his first wife. Nevertheless, out of this pain sprang poetry of lasting value. In this month's issue, we take a close look at this side of his work, and also review the new film.

Finally, let me draw your attention to Richard Dalby's feature on the extraordinary Lord Dunsany. Not only was he one of the greatest fantasy writers of this century, but he also wrote some superb chillers — his story, 'The Two Bottles of Relish', is a classic — some remarkable plays, and the hilarious 'travel tales' of the rambling, whiskey-drinking clubman, Joseph Jorkens. A fascinating man, and a remarkable body of work.

Our other articles this month feature: Canadian humorist, Stephen Leacock; essayist and storyteller, Charles Lamb; and books about wild flowers.

### **NEXT ADVERTISING COPY DEADLINES**

**19 APRIL for JUNE issue; 24 MAY for JULY issue**

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# THE 'CHALET SCHOOL' BOOKS OF ELINOR M. BRENT-DYER

A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

BY MARTIN SPENCE

**E**linor M. Brent-Dyer (1894-1969) has the highest aggregate sales of any children's writer except Enid Blyton — and the lowest profile. Today, in the age of *Grange Hill* and video games, sales of her 'Chalet School' titles still top 115,000 a year. And yet, despite their continuing availability in paperback, no children's books have been as fanatically collected over the past decade as the original hardback copies of Brent-Dyer's 59 'Chalet School' stories.

Certainly no other series has undergone such a dramatic rise in value. The last ten years have seen the asking price of one title rise from £10 to £200, and a first edition of *The School at the Chalet* (1925) on offer at Sothebys. Indeed, any complete copy of Brent-Dyer's *The School by the River* (1930) or *The Little Marie-José* (1932) — quoted ten years ago at £10-£15 (BMC 10) — would probably be sold at auction today.

She remains the most sought-after of all school-story writers. Angela Brazil's appeal seems now to be largely historical, and her collectability is declining. The brisker Dorita Fairlie Bruce, with her bright heroine Dimsie, continues to be strongly collected, as do the more saccharine fictions of Elsie J. Oxenham (their length and implicit snobbishness mean that they are unlikely ever to be reprinted). But, of the truly collectable trio — Brent-Dyer, Bruce and Oxenham — only Brent-Dyer now seems certain to move into the next century as a living writer.

This month, Friends of the Chalet School (UK) will gather in Hereford to celebrate the centenary of Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's birth and



*Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, whose centenary falls this year.*

to place a plaque on the school she founded there. Exhibitions will follow in Hereford and Edinburgh, and a memorial plaque will be unveiled in Pertisau, the small village in the Austrian Tyrol which inspired the 'Chalet School' stories.

No one would have been more surprised at this than Miss Brent-Dyer. A modest, exuberant woman, blessed with great warmth, common sense and kindness, she started life in circumstances far removed from the large, happy families of her books. She was born





*The very first 'Chalet School' book, published by Chambers in 1925. Nina K. Brisley drew the jacket.*

Gladys Eleanor May Dyer on 6th April 1894 in a small terraced house in South Shields with no bathroom, inside lavatory or hot water. Her father, who had been married previously, was 36, her mother 24.

Charles Dyer, who had been promoted through the ranks to become an officer in the Royal Navy and then worked as a Marine Surveyor, left his wife and two children when Elinor was just three. Her only brother died at the age of seventeen. On 30th July 1911, when Elinor was seventeen, her father died of cancer in London, cutting his second wife and children out of his will. Shortly after his death, Brent-Dyer's formidable mother married the wealthy son of an optician. When readers later clamoured for details of her painful past, she never mentioned her South Shields birthplace or her broken home. In later life, she understandably preferred the company of her friends to that of any blood relations.



*Brisley also provided the inside illustrations for this book. This one depicts Joey and a weeping Simone.*

Like other gifted women of her class and generation, she began her working life as an untrained teacher, taking her first position at the age of eighteen. During the First World War, she studied at the City of Leeds Training College, and for the next thirty years taught in a wide range of schools. In her limited spare time, she wrote.

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## THE CHALET SCHOOL AND ROSALIE



This book was the only one in the series to be first issued in paperback only. Copies now fetch up to £100.

At three, she had taught herself to read; at four she began to learn music and to tell stories to her little brother and their cat. At five, she won a prize in a competition with a highly moral story called 'Lotty's Fright', about a naughty girl who borrows her cousin's new bike without permission and is rewarded with a broken arm. In 1906, when she was twelve,

she sent a short story, 'Jack's Revenge', to *Sunday*, a children's magazine, for which she was paid ten shillings (50p).

It's not clear whether or not this story was actually published in the periodical, but it certainly appeared under the name 'May Dyer' in a volume called *Sunday and Everyday Reading for the Young* (Wells, Gardner, Darton, 1914). This book seems to be an annual rather than a weekly publication because, although the pages are numbered, they are undated. The front board has a picture of a sailor boy holding a blue and white flag. The story itself, which is told in the first person, is just over a page long and concerns two children called Rose and Jack, and their pets: a rabbit and a fox terrier puppy.

## SPELLING

Around 1922, Elinor M. Brent-Dyer took the name by which we now know her. Registered at birth as Gladys Eleanor May Dyer, she had attended school in South Shields as May Dyer, but was known as Patricia Maraquita by her friends at Leeds Training College. She subsequently dropped the name 'Gladys' entirely, changing the spelling of her second name and retaining her third — 'May' — for a short time. She then changed that to 'Mary', putting her father's middle name, 'Brent', before her surname.

This was the name she used from 1924 for all her writing, including her rather uninspired early short stories (some of which, it is almost certain, remain undiscovered). 'The Lady in the Yellow Gown', a limp shocker, appeared in *The Big Book for Girls* in 1925 under the name 'Elinor G. Brent-Dyer' (which, unless



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*This postcard from the early 1930s shows the Austrian village of Pertisau, which first inspired the series.*

she was still dithering between 'Gladys' and 'Mary', is presumably a mistake), and was subsequently reprinted in *The Golden Story Book for Girls* (1931). All known copies of *The Big Book for Girls* state 'Reprinted 1925', but no earlier edition has yet been discovered.

A circus story, 'Carlotta to the Rescue', appeared in a magazine called *Stories of the Circus*, Book 4 in the early 1930s, together with one called 'The Lure of the Tan' by Geoffrey Prout. Both also appeared in *The Children's Circus Book* (Associated Newspapers, c.1934) with identical text and illustrations (by Eileen Mayo), although the order of the two stories was reversed. The colour cover features a jolly picture of a circus tent and clown.

When it was next reprinted, in *Come to the Circus* (P. R. Gawthorn, c.1938), 'Carlotta to the Rescue' had become the lead story and photographs had been added, as well as a colour dustjacket. There were further short stories across the years, but apparently only one written for magazine publication. This was a 'Girl Guide' story called 'The Robins Make Good' (*Girls' Own Annual*, Vol. 57).

From 1920 onwards, Brent-Dyer wrote historical and romantic stories, sentimental poetry and — not surprisingly, given her

dramatic approach to life — plays. Her first known drama, *My Lady Caprice* (1921), was professionally staged in South Shields, and was swiftly followed by *Polly Danvers — Heiress*. Then, suddenly, she took the advice she was later to give her readers and started to write about what she knew: the world of school.

## CONFIDENCE

The result was the first book in what later became known as the 'La Rochelle' series: *Gerry Goes to School* (1922). It was accepted immediately by the leading publishers of girls' school stories, W. & R. Chambers of Edinburgh. Their confidence in this accomplished first book was underlined by their choice of cover artist: Mabel Lucie Attwell (Gordon Browne did the four internal illustrations). Copies of this work, in their pictorial blue cloth boards and pictorial dustjacket, fetch around £30 today.

Always more interested in dramatic impact than consistency or logic, Brent-Dyer would later weave her first heroine, Gerry, into the 'Chalet' series and, as its popularity overtook that of the 'La Rochelle' books, she switched the focus of the latter from school to family adventure. Finally, she 'recycled' the



*Joey takes a tumble in this non-school title from 1954. Copies in the W. Spence jacket now sell for up to £60.*

second generation of La Rochelle girls as pupils of the Chalet School. An instant hit, *Gerry Goes to School* became the first of almost 100 children's books, ranging from historical yarns to adventure stories. Strangely, it was the only Brent-Dyer title to be published in America, being issued by Lippincott of Philadelphia in 1923.

## HOLIDAY

And then came *The School at the Chalet*. By this time, Brent-Dyer was still teaching, but she had acquired an agent, and her books were selling well enough to finance her first holiday abroad. She chose the Austrian Tyrol. The beauty of the village of Pertisau on the fjord-like Achensee lake above Innsbruck had attracted the rich, talented and famous since Prince Ferdinand had travelled there in 1600 with 34 white horses to hunt, shoot and fish. Freud stayed there too, in 1900, at the hotel known in the 'Chalet' stories as the 'Kron Prinz Karl'. In 1924, the year of Brent-Dyer's visit,

Margaret Kennedy published her twice-filmed bestseller, *The Constant Nymph*, which is also set in Pertisau.

In 1924, Pertisau was a small but thriving mountain resort with eleven hotels and guest houses, including the now-derelict Hotel Alpenhof, then one of the leading hotels in Austria, with sixty beds. The site of this hotel closely resembles that of the fictional Chalet School, but it is unlikely that Brent-Dyer stayed there, since it then cost twice as much as any other hotel in the village.

Her eight-week holiday in Pertisau changed her life. The great warmth and simple faith of the people were instrumental in her conversion to Catholicism in 1930, and the extreme beauty of the village, lake and mountains inspired the creation of the most famous school in children's literature.

## REALISM

*The School at the Chalet* (1925) describes — with, for its time, impressive realism — 24-year-old Madge Bettany's successful attempt to start a multi-national school in the Austrian Tyrol. Built around the character of Madge's younger sister, Joey, the book created a romantic world which, unusually in children's fiction, was affected by historical events. The *Times Literary Supplement* immediately hailed it as "delightful", while the *Times* described it as "hopelessly addictive" when it was reissued in hardback by Chambers in 1988. This edition features a facsimile of the original jacket, new line drawings, and a peach of a portrait of Miss Brent-Dyer herself, all bushy eyebrows and looking like the cat who got the cream.

The appeal of the 'Chalet School' books was instant. Dynamic dialogue, astonishing linguistic inventiveness, a remarkable lack of sentimentality and the breathless pace of an inspired soap provided a formula that has held three generations of children spellbound.

Copies of the first edition of *The School at the Chalet* now fetch up to £100 in the Nina K. Brisley dustjacket, the front of which shows Madge and Joey reading a letter; the spine, a girl climbing a mountain. The cover illustration is repeated on the brown cloth front board.

Nina K. Brisley (1898-1978), like her sister Joyce Lankester Brisley, the creator of Milly Molly Mandy, had written and illustrated stories since early childhood. She came to the notice of the Press baron, Lord Northcliffe, at the age of only thirteen: "He was sitting at his desk, a fat cigar burning on the ashtray," Joyce Brisley records. "He seemed taken with Nina's wood-wiggers [creatures with tubby little bodies] and remarked: 'Yes, these are good.'"

But it is Nina's illustrations for more than two dozen 'Chalet School' stories that are her most lasting memorial. Working in pen and wash, she specialised in evocative, 'frozen' images — often relying on strong facial expressions — rather in the manner of the early silent films. Who can forget the remarkable plate which sums up Joey's sentimental French friend, Simone, as completely as her immortal words: "You laughed at me because my hair was long, so I thought if I cut it short you would love me!" Brent-Dyer's publishers, Chambers, sold their holdings of original Brisley artwork about ten years ago,

and these pieces are now much sought-after.

Brent-Dyer wrote another dozen 'Chalet School' books between 1925 and the outbreak of war, of which *The Exploits of the Chalet Girls* (1933) is now the hardest to find in a dustjacket. Although all nominally 'school stories', they evoke a wide variety of settings and atmospheres, from the Socratic (*Eustacia Goes to the Chalet School*, 1930) to the Ruritanian (*The Princess of the Chalet School*, 1927), the pastoral (*The Chalet Girls in Camp*, 1932) to the grimly realistic (*The Chalet School in Exile*, 1940).

## HARROWING

The latter takes the annexation of Austria by Germany as its theme and, uniquely among school stories, contains a harrowing scene of Nazi Jew-baiting. The original Nina K. Brisley dustjacket, showing Joey and her sister being questioned by a German officer, was withdrawn immediately after publication following protests from parents. A copy in Very Good condition with a complete dustjacket was recently offered for £195. A similar copy in the easier-to-come-by



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An illustration from the second of the rare, annual-format 'Chalet Books'.

replacement jacket (which was not by Brisley), showing the Chalet girls disguised as Tyrolean peasants, would fetch around £40-£50.

With the exception of *The School at the Chalet*, which has dark brown lettering, the original editions of the first thirteen 'Chalet School' titles invariably carry gold lettering on the spine and cover. The colour of the boards is not a reliable indicator as to whether or not a book is a first, since it often varied within a single edition. All the books up to the twelfth title, *Jo Returns to the Chalet School* (1936), have one frontispiece and three internal plates by Nina K. Brisley, and generally carry the words 'Original Edition' and the date of first publication on the back of the title page. An exception is *The Chalet School and Jo* (1931). Both British Library and Bodleian copies state "Latest reprint August 1931", but no earlier copy has yet come to light.

On 12th December 1930, probably as a result of a visit to the Oberammergau Passion Play, Elinor Brent-Dyer converted to Catholicism, as does her heroine, Joey, in a book which — to quote the *Chalet Club Newsletter* 9 — "has never seen the light of day". According to inspired research by Brent-Dyer's biographer, Helen McClelland, this lost work, *Two Chalet Girls in India*, was written in 1939, which would explain the suddenly Catholic Joey of *The Chalet School in Exile* (published in March, 1940).

The Indian story's non-appearance may have been due to Brent-Dyer's insistence that her heroine should grow up and yet still remain a central character. It says much for her seriousness as a writer that she should have wished to tackle the subject of conversion in a children's book — and little for her Presbyterian publishers that they should have rejected it. (Amazingly, however, they sanctioned Brent-Dyer's brave war-time pacifism — the Chalet School had an

active Peace League — just as Latimer House later left her references to the atom bomb as legalised "mass-murder" in her 1950 story, *Fardingales*.) But perhaps it simply comes down to Chambers' reluctance to publish any 'Chalet School' book which was not specifically a 'school story', an unwillingness which was to continue across the years.

## FOCUS

With *The Chalet School in Exile* (1940), Brent-Dyer successfully switched the focus of the stories from one character — Joey — to a group, introducing a succession of new settings: Guernsey (which she had visited in 1923), Hereford, a Welsh island, and finally Switzerland, which she had also visited (see *Chalet Club Newsletter* 18).

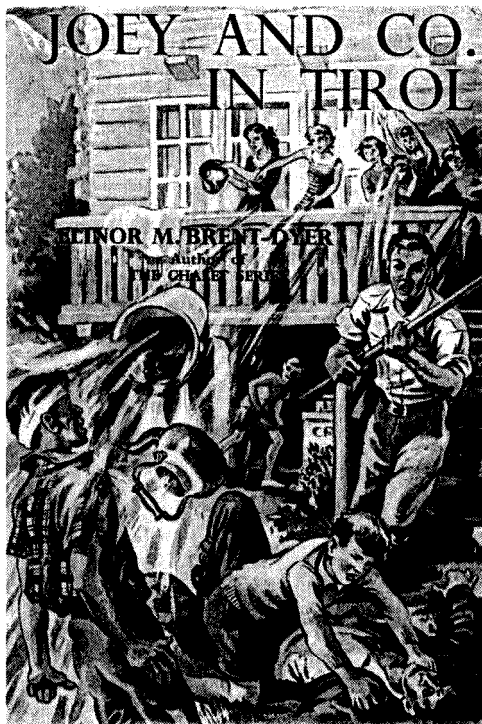
Brent-Dyer had actually moved from South Shields to the cathedral town of Hereford with her mother and stepfather in 1933. She tried governing, sang regularly in the Festival choir and, after her stepfather's death, founded her own school, The Margaret Roper, named after Sir Thomas More's eldest daughter (she had completed an unpublished historical novel about More in the summer of 1938). And, of course, during spare moments snatched from teaching, she continued to work on the second longest juvenile series ever written (after W. E. Johns' 78 'Biggles' books).

By a remarkable balancing act, Brent-Dyer kept up her school, her Alsatian-breeding, her

singing and her writing for a decade. But in 1948 she gave up the struggle and finally closed her real school to concentrate on her fictional one. Her next 'Chalet' book, *Three go to the Chalet School* (1949), sold an astonishing 10,000 copies within a couple of months of publication.

As well as the 'Chalet School' books, Brent-Dyer continued to write an equal number of non-'Chalet' titles. Some — like the seven 'La Rochelle' novels (set mainly in Guernsey) and the 'Chudleigh Hold' books for boys — were 'mini-series'; others were one-offs or had only a single sequel. Between 1947 and 1949, she also published three now-scarce, annual-format *Chalet Books for Girls*, consisting of practical advice, short stories and an early version of what later became *Tom Tackles the Chalet School* ("Non-sense Mater! Vicarage kids don't have fleas!"). A *Junior Chalet Book for Girls* was announced in 1949 but never published. A story from the annuals called 'The Chalet School Mystery' was later republished in *My Treasure Hour Bumper Annual* (1970). This, too, is now scarce.

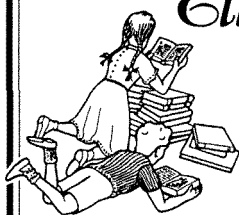
By 1950, Brent-Dyer had become a bestselling author throughout the English-speaking world, and Chambers published four geography readers aimed at her strongest subsidiary markets: Kenya, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. These books — *Verena Visits New Zealand*, *Bess on her Own in Canada*, *Quintette in Queensland* and *Sharlie's Kenya Diary* — now fetch as much as £50 each. During the Fifties, she produced up to four 'Chalet School' titles a year, leaping the vast social gap between the 1940s and the 1950s with ease, while her former competitors were



Another rare, non-school title. This one takes Joey to the 'new' Austria of autobahns and hydro-electricity.

struggling to get published, and achieving an unparalleled fan-following which her publishers were quick to capitalise on.

Enid Blyton's children's clubs were largely fund-raisers for her favourite charities (she relied on personal fan-mail for marketing purposes), but Brent-Dyer's 'Chalet Club' — launched in May 1959 — was altogether more sophisticated. Masterminded by Chambers, it



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THE  
CHALET  
SCHOOL  
REUNION

# THE CHALET SCHOOL REUNION

E. M. BRENT-DYER



Dorothy Brook drew the wrap-around jacket for the fiftieth book in the series, *The Chalet School Reunion*.

used competitions, quizzes, prizes and direct questions from Brent-Dyer to discover just what her readers wanted next. It remains a unique example of market research in the field of children's fiction.

The twenty *Chalet Club Newsletters* now fetch high prices. There were also several associated leaflets, membership certificates signed by Brent-Dyer, and a club badge: a single silver pin, surmounted by an edelweiss and the acronym, 'CC'. Because of its fragility, this is now the scarcest of all children's club badges.

## TRIP

The Chalet Club also confirmed what Chambers had long suspected: that there was no specific interest in the Tyrolean background to the 'Chalet' books (a projected trip to Pertisau was cancelled in 1963 due to a lack of takers) and even less in Brent-Dyer herself. What fascinated her fanatical fans was the fictional world of the Chalet School itself, where everything from Matron's dormitory inspection to Joey's untidy hair was always reassuringly the same.

Brent-Dyer had always resisted calls to return the series to its original Austrian setting but, in *The Coming of Age of the Chalet School* (1958), she brought Joey briefly back to the Tyrolean summer ("Wow! Here comes the rain!") to beat a girl half her age at swimming ("Gosh, Jo! You can swim!"). *Joey and Co. in the Tirol* (1960), the first non-school title for six years, and among the scarcest, transports Joey to the new Austria of autobahns, hydro-electricity and bursting appendixes ("The sooner it's yanked out, the better!").

Just two years later, in *A Future Chalet School Girl*, we are back in the Tyrol with Joey and her eleven natural and three adopted children. Among the trials they have to contend with is an earth-shattering explosion ("Pop!") of blackcurrant wine ("Oh! your underclothes!"). The book fetches around £50-£60 today in its full-colour dustjacket.

In 1964, Brent-Dyer moved from Hereford to Redhill in Surrey where she bought a house with her old friend, Phyllis Matthewman, the children's writer, and her husband (who was also Brent-Dyer's agent). Here she continued

to write, although two heart attacks had slowed her pace. During the final, painful months of her life, she was not well enough to type, and her last book, *Prefects of the Chalet School* (1970), was dictated to Mrs. Matthewman. She died peacefully on 20th September 1969.

"The world of juvenile literature is made poorer by her death," said the *Times*, instancing her "huge readership from all over the world — not only of children but adults", her realism, her "taut style and breathless speed", and her invention of the Sixties 'buzz-word', 'fabulous'. Subsequent critics have been less judicious, although in a series of *New Statesmen* essays starting in the Thirties (collected in *Girls will be Girls*, 1974), Arthur Marshall praised the pace and surreality of her writing.

## SYMPATHETIC

Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig patronised Brent-Dyer in their survey of girls' fiction, *You're a Brick, Angela!* (1976), as did educational psychologist, Nicholas Tucker, in an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* (3rd July 1970). Much more sympathetic is Helen McClelland's pioneering biography, *Behind the Chalet School*, which is jam-packed with fascinating information. This book was originally published by New Horizon in 1981 and reissued by Anchor in 1986. Copies of the first edition fetch around £15-£20 today. More recently, Rosemary Auchmuty's stimulating

*A World of Girls* (1992) celebrated the Chalet School as an ideal, all-female community.

Elinor Brent-Dyer was interviewed by Brian Redhead on the BBC TV programme, *Tonight*, in 1964, and often voiced her hope that the 'Chalet School' stories would be televised. However, their brisk moral tone makes this increasingly unlikely.

One thing is certain, however: a complete set of 'Chalet School' first editions in dustjackets — worth around £400 ten years ago — might now fetch as much as ten times that figure. Values peaked in the late 1980s, when prices of £75 and upwards were not uncommon for first editions (in dustjackets) of even the easier titles. Since then, they have stabilised at around £15-£30 from general dealers, and between £30-£50 from specialist ones. And, as is so often the case with children's books, it is the final — as well as the earliest — titles which, because of their smaller print-runs, secure the highest prices today.

Of the earlier 'Chalet School' titles, the hardest to find in dustjackets are still *The School at the Chalet* and *The Exploits of the Chalet Girls*. Of the mid-period books, *Bride Leads the Chalet School* (1953) is perhaps the scarcest, still fetching over £75 in Very Good condition with dustjacket. During the Brent-Dyer boom of the late 1980s, even a copy bound upside down was snapped up at £75! There is also a premium on any copy of *Mary-Lou of the Chalet School* (1956) which

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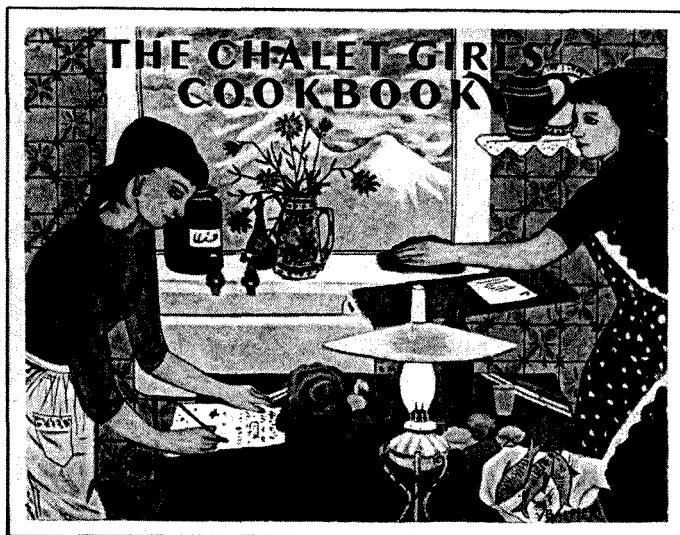
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retains the dizzy Dorothy Brook jacket. It's scarce.

The only 'Chalet School' title to be first published in paperback only was *The Chalet School and Rosalie* (1951). This 94-page book — originally priced at 2/6 (12p) — features a three-colour cover showing two girls in uniform, one holding a small garden fork in her right hand. Because of its small print-run and ephemeral format, it is now the most sought-after of all the books in the series. A copy recently sold immediately for £85.

Premium prices are fetched by all 'Chalet School' books describing Joey's out-of-school adventures. These begin with *Jo to the Rescue* (1945), in which the attempted theft of a violin on the Yorkshire Moors is spun out over 245 pages, although the wartime format — 18cm x 12cm — is admittedly small (it was one of only three 'Chalet School' books to use it). The main event is the splendidly-named Zephyr Burthill's attempt to dope Joey's St. Bernard, who had already survived the Nazis.

Also much sought-after is the non-school title in which *Joey Goes to the Oberland* (1954), despite falling into a packing case. For a moment, things look black ("I'm going to have a stroke!") but, with swift action ("Hot up some coffee, open the windows and get a glass

of water!") and appropriate medication ("Here's a tablet to calm her nerves"), she gets there eventually. W. Spence did the 'gee-whizz' jacket in which every mouth hangs open, goldfish-like. Chambers were understandably reluctant to take these out-of-school adventures, and there was a six year gap until the next one.

Of all the non-school titles, the fiftieth book in the series, *The Chalet School Reunion* (1963) — with its Mills & Boon-style wrap-around jacket and a love-story to match ("I want the right to take care of you, beloved!") — is the most

sought-after. A bizarre still-life by Dorothy Brook of old girls and Joey's St. Bernard mainlining *Kaffee und Kuchen* adorns the dustjacket.

## GILT

The first — and only — edition is bound in blue cloth with a white spine, and contains a full-colour frontispiece and four illustrations. Brent-Dyer's signature is embossed in gilt on the front cover. The dustjacket is not particularly scarce, but the accompanying key to the characters shown on it and the yellow 'Jubilee' band which originally encircled the book most certainly are. Even ex-library copies in jackets have been known to change hands for up to £50, and Mint copies — complete with jacket, key and band — now fetch up to £80. Dorothy Brook's original cover painting was presented to Brent-Dyer by her publishers. Copies were made available to Chalet Club members, and these are now rare.

Serious collectors will also want *The Chalet Girls' Cook Book* (1953), which includes recipes from the three 'Chalet School' annuals as well as several new ones. Oblong in format, this book was issued in a rather primitive-looking colour dustjacket by the artist, Balmer. This is now exceptionally scarce, and more than doubles the value of a copy from around £30 to £75+.



And it isn't just the 'Chalet' books themselves that attract collectors: associated titles are also popular. For instance, a copy of Kipling's *Thy Servant a Dog*, signed by Brent-Dyer and carrying the Margaret Roper School bookplate, was recently on offer at £80. There is also strong interest in any books mentioned in the 'Chalet School' stories, including the 'Elsie' series by American authoress, Martha Finlay, and Austin Clare's *The Carved Cartoon*, a novel based on the life of Grinling Gibbons. Like her creator, Joey Bettany was a passionate collector. ("What about going to that second-hand bookshop in Marmion Road? I'd like more 'Elsie' books.")

More shocks than the Chalet girls ever encountered face anyone making the pilgrimage to Pertisau this year to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of Brent-Dyer's visit. Paragliders plummet into the lake where Joey once rescued a rival from certain death

by drowning; weekenders from Munich hurtle down the motorway on the opposite shore, and a village chapel has been demolished to make way for a coach park. But the old steam railway which the Chalet girls knew is still the same, and nothing will ever change the lake where it all began: six icy miles of turquoise, alive with dancing shadows.

*The research carried out by Rosemary Auchmuty, Gill Bilski, Clarissa Cridland, Susan Hodgson, Helen McClelland and Sue Sims is gratefully acknowledged.*

The School at the Chalet, The Mystery at the Chalet School, Jo to the Rescue, Joey and Co. in Tirol, The Chalet School Reunion and Prefects of the Chalet School will be reissued on 12th May in Armada paperbacks (£3.99). *Cassettes of Jo of the Chalet School and Princess of the Chalet School will also be available (£4.99).*

## ELINOR M. BRENT-DYER UK BIBLIOGRAPHY

A guide to current values of first editions in Very Good condition with dustjackets.

### 'CHALET SCHOOL' SERIES

THE SCHOOL AT THE CHALET (Chambers, 1925) .....	£75-£100
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<b>ESSENTIAL READING</b>	
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# CHARLES LAMB

ESSAYIST AND STORYTELLER

BY A.R. JAMES

Charles Lamb was 43 years old when he arranged for the publication of his collected *Works*. Such an enterprise might suggest that he considered his literary career to be largely over but, in fact, his best-loved, most enduring writings were yet to come. It is given to some authors to achieve their greatest triumphs late in life, and Lamb was among these. Before 1820, he produced much excellent work — verse, drama and criticism — but, except in his letters, his personality had seldom had full play.

Had he given up authorship then, he would today be almost unknown. Specialists would prize his critical essays, and his *Tales from Shakespear* (sic) would still be read, but the general reader would probably know him only for a few poems in anthologies. It is unlikely that his *Letters* would have been collected, and there would be no *Essays of Elia* — twin delights without which the world of literature would be a poorer place!

Charles Lamb was born in 1775 in the Temple — still today the haunt of lawyers and a leafy haven from the noise and fumes of the nearby Strand and Fleet Street. The last of seven children (and one of only three to survive), he found himself in the company of elders from the outset. Lamb's father was body servant to a barrister, Samuel Salt, and part-time waiter in the



*The Queen of Hearts*



High on a Throne of state is seen  
She whom all Hearts own for their Queen.  
Three Pages are in waiting by;  
He with the umbrella is her Spy.  
To spy out rogueries in the dark,  
And smell a rat as you shall mark.

*She made some Tarts*



The Queen here by the King's commands,  
Who does not like Cook's dirty hands,  
Makes the court-pastry all herself,  
Pambo the knave, that roguish elf,  
Watches each sugary sweet ingredient,  
And flihy thinks of an expedient.

A spread from Lamb's first ever work for children, *The King and Queen of Hearts* (Godwin, 1805).

Temple's Hall, and it seems that his mother (about whom we know little) had married below her social station.

From the age of five, Charles attended first a dame-school, and then an insignificant local establishment, all the time enjoying the freedom of Samuel Salt's private library. When he was seven, Salt nominated him for Christ's Hospital, the Bluecoat School, then at Westminster, where he remained until 1789. However, the classical education he received there, and the many later-to-be-famous friends that he made, seem not to have immediately stood him in good stead, for his next few years were a time of hardship and relative poverty.

Perhaps he had difficulty in starting a career, for Salt's help was again needed, in 1791, to obtain a minor clerkship with the decaying South Sea Company (of the infamous 'Bubble' of the 1720s), where his brother already worked (and would, much later, become Chief Accountant). Why Charles remained there a mere five months is not known, but he is next recorded as working for

the East India Company, a large, prosperous and progressive organisation.

To obtain that clerkship, Charles had to enter into a bond, find two sureties, and work for three years without pay. It was a terrible blow to his family when, at around that time, Samuel Salt died, for they lost both their home and their income. The shock pushed Lamb's father into senility, and he never worked again.

The family, now in lodgings, consisted of both parents, Charles and his sister Mary, eleven years his senior, and an aged aunt. The burden of providing for them fell mainly on Mary, who struggled as a home-based dressmaker, for Charles was as yet unpaid. Aunt Hetty's meagre income paid only for her board.

The stage seemed set for tragedy — and, sure enough, it soon arrived. Mother, embittered about her fall in the world; father, but a babbling shell; Mary, working at all hours — including by candle-light — over her sewing; and Charles having to keep up a decent appearance but unable to help with



## POETRY FOR CHILDREN

BY CHARLES AND MARY LAMB



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RICHARD HERNE SHEPHERD



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1872

*After the success of their Tales from Shakespear, Charles and Mary collaborated on this verse collection.*

the rent. Tempers frayed, and nerves became ragged. Charles, in love, but with nothing to offer a bride, could not desert his family. He suffered a breakdown, and spent several weeks in a madhouse.

And then, in 1796, Mary snapped over a quarrel involving her helper, and everything

fell apart. She took a knife and attacked her mother. Charles interposed, but when Mary's frenzy was over, his mother was dead, his father was bleeding from a head wound, and his aunt was unconscious. The authorities were sympathetic, but Mary was committed to a public asylum until Charles could house her more comfortably in a private madhouse. Friends rallied, a relative provided a temporary home for the aunt, and Charles was left to look after his father. Those miserable circumstances continued for two-and-a-half years, until the deaths of his father and aunt, in 1799, enabled Charles to bring Mary home. Their domestic partnership was to last until they were parted by death.

## TRAGEDY

In the years before the murder, he had been trying his hand at poetry, with some success. In 1796, he had contributed four sonnets to a book by Samuel Coleridge, an old school friend, and more of his verses were included in the extended second edition, but for some while after the tragedy he was unable to give time or thought to poetry. However, in 1798, he participated with Charles Lloyd on a book entitled *Blank Verse* and, in the same year, he wrote the long poem, *A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret*.

Although brother and sister were hard up, and there was the constant anxiety of Mary's nervous condition (she was to make several more visits to the madhouse), life was now more congenial, and Charles resumed his literary pursuits, as well as an extensive correspondence — the latter mainly conducted during office hours! Early editions of his

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Letters contain around 600 examples written between 1796 and 1834 (some of these were the subject of litigation, and so don't appear in every edition), and later reissues include a further 200 or so — but on that subject, more later.

Lamb slowly improved his position at India House, but his shortcomings as a clerk prevented him from achieving promotion to the higher ranks. A friendly colleague recorded that "he was neither a neat nor an accurate accountant . . . he made frequent errors, which he was in the habit of wiping out with his little finger". He was a poor time-keeper and once, when chided over his lateness, replied that he never committed the same sin at the end of the day! His classical education had left him deficient in arithmetic, causing him perpetual anxiety over his accounts, and his lack of neatness meant that he was sometimes denied salary increases.

However, Lamb was popular with his colleagues and was happy enough at India House, where the atmosphere seems to have been remarkably informal for the times and for such an important public institution. The clerks there sent and received their private letters 'post-free' — that is, at their employer's expense. From a strictly business point of view, the directors made an indifferent bargain when they recruited Charles Lamb! He was to work at India House for 33 years, until 1825, when he retired on a pension, the unexpectedness and generosity of which surprised him.

A friend of Lamb's has left this description of him in his early twenties, by which time he'd already been working for the East India Company for a number of years:

"A small, spare man, clothed in black, who went out every morning and returned every afternoon, as regularly as the hands of the clock . . . He was somewhat stiff in his manner, and almost clerical in dress: which indicated much wear. He had a long, melancholy face, with keen penetrating eyes; and he walked with a short, resolute step, City-wards . . . Small and spare in person, and with small legs, he had a dark complexion, dark, curling hair, almost black, and a grave look, lightening up occasionally, and capable

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MARY LAMB



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*This Hodder & Stoughton illustrated edition of the Lambs' Tales is just one of many collectable reissues.*

of sudden merriment . . . His mouth well-shaped, lips expressive, his brown eyes were quick, restless and glittering: and he had a grand head, full of thought."

Coleridge once described him as "gentle-hearted" — which infuriated Lamb! He wrote that he would be ashamed to think that the description — which he thought implied 'poor-spirited' — was meant in praise, but that, if it was intended as a joke, it was a poor one.

Frustratingly for him, however, the word 'gentle' has often been used to describe him in his Elia persona — but it is an appropriate description, reflecting his kindness, cordiality, sincerity and tender heartedness. These very real qualities wholly offset his occasional irritability, and tendency to make tactless or cutting comments. No writer has done more to celebrate the good in his friends, and his selflessness in surrendering his own prospects to care for his stricken sister, and

his uncomplaining acceptance of his selfish and affluent brother's indifference to his family's plight, reveal an amazingly generous spirit. Gentle or not, no wonder his friends loved him!

In 1800, Charles and Mary returned to the Temple, where they were to remain in lodgings for eighteen years — the longest they lived together anywhere. It was a happy time and, although hard-up, at least they were no longer poor, and were surrounded by friends. Their weekly 'at homes' were famous for their jolly card games, sparkling conversation, cold meat, hot potatoes and porter for all.

## DRAMA

Charles needed to supplement his India House salary and dabbled unsuccessfully in journalism, and also wrote two plays. *John Woodvil* was a five-act blank-verse drama in Elizabethan style, which Lamb submitted to Kemble. The famous actor kept the manuscript for a year, lost it, asked for a copy — and then rejected it! Lamb had slightly better luck with his next play, a farce entitled

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*Mr. H*, which was produced but hissed off the stage on its first night. Not entirely discouraged, he had *John Woodvil* printed at his own expense in 1802, but his involvement with the theatre was at an end.

In 1805, the publisher, M. J. Godwin, issued the first of Lamb's works for children, *The King and Queen of Hearts*, as part of his 'Juvenile Library'. The text was basically a paraphrase of the famous nursery rhyme, "The Queen of Hearts, She made some tarts . . .", and it was accompanied by fifteen amusing copper-plate engravings. This charming little card-covered booklet was reissued in facsimile almost a century later, in 1902, at the instigation of the great Lamb scholar and biographer, E. V. Lucas. Needless to say, the first edition is extremely rare.

Lamb had long been a serious student of Shakespeare, as well as of other Elizabethan dramatists, and this interest resulted in one of his most enduring titles.

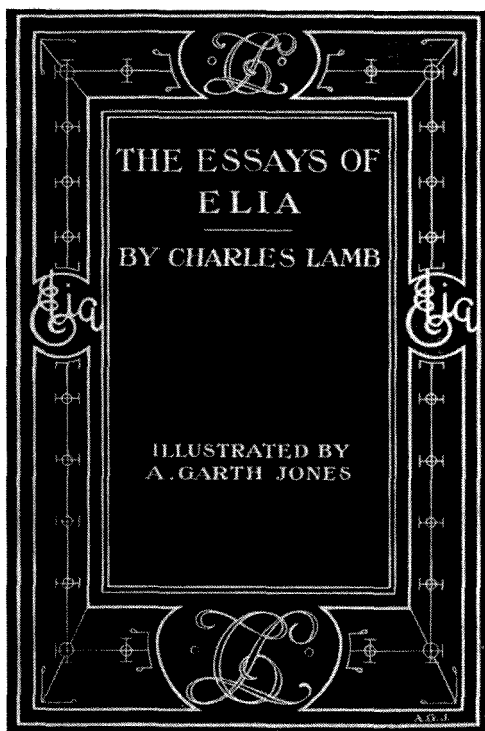
A publisher had asked Mary to rewrite twenty of Shakespeare's plays as prose stories for children, and brother and sister agreed to share the task for the fee of sixty guineas (£63).

Their joint effort, *Lamb's Tales From Shakespear* (1807), is a timeless work, one that is read as much by adults as by children. Most critics agree that Mary's contribution — she adapted the comedies — is far better suited to younger readers than is Charles' more literary treatment of the tragedies, but the book has been popular with every succeeding generation for 180 years, and has been reprinted many times.



*An illustration from this edition, showing a scene from As You Like It.*

Charles and Mary enjoyed working together, sitting at opposite sides of the same table — it was a pleasurable extension of their harmonious life together. Although a capable woman with plenty of character, Mary had an unquestioning devotion to the younger brother who had dedicated his life to her welfare, while Charles unfailingly praised the sister who cared for him with such love. There has never been any suspicion of anything unhealthy or untoward in their relationship — indeed, they have come down to us as a model of brotherly and sisterly devotion, the best of examples towards which we can all aspire.



This edition of the 'Elia' essays dates from 1902. Note the way that Lamb's initials are woven into the design.

Considering the extent and quality of Mary's contribution to their first joint work, and that it was she who was first approached by the publisher, it is odd that her name was omitted from the title pages of the first six — and of several subsequent — editions. How could Charles have consented to this outrage? However, Mary seems not to have complained, and so perhaps it was her own choice.

However, in his letters, Charles always refers to it as "our" book. Of the twenty pieces commissioned, he claimed to have written only six, and attributed the rest, and most of the preface, to Mary (although he helped her with the grammar and spelling). Whilst they were pleased with their book, both were disgusted by its illustrations, the choice of which they had left to the publisher who, apparently, delegated the task to his youngest child! In the covering letter to the copy they sent to Wordsworth, Charles asked him to tear out the pictures before reading the book.

## SUCCESS

However, despite the illustrations, the work was an immediate success, and a second edition soon followed. Since then, the number of new editions has been legion — its listing takes up over a dozen columns in the British Library catalogue, and that doesn't include any of the most recent reissues!

Encouraged by the triumphant reception of their first collaboration, Charles and Mary brought out first a story, *Mrs. Leicester's School*, and then a book of *Poetry for Children* (both 1809). The previous year had appeared what was to prove to be a major work, his *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Contemporary with Shakespeare* (Longman, 1808), which established him in the front rank of literary critics.

It is not too much to say that, with this book, Lamb single-handedly rescued from oblivion a number of deserving Elizabethan dramatists whose subsequent fame has stemmed directly from his enthusiasm for, and

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commentaries upon, their works. He consolidated his critical reputation with two distinguished essays on 'The Genius of Hogarth' and 'The Tragedies of Shakespeare', which appeared in *The Reflector* in 1810 and 1811 respectively. Together with his *Specimens*, these represent his best work before he began his *Essays of Elia* in 1820.

Surprisingly, this burst of creativity was followed by a long period of inactivity during which Lamb seems to have been worn down by the pressures of his life. He suffered bouts of depression, and his anxiety over Mary's mental health never left him. He began to find his job irksome, and became obsessed that errors would be found in his accounts, and that he would be given new tasks beyond his abilities. He believed that he smoked more than was good for him, and thought himself too indulgent with drink when in company — which he often was. These concerns affected his appearance and behaviour, and he started to worry that his deteriorating health would compel him to resign his post.

Apparently convinced that his life's work would soon be over, he took two important steps. Firstly, he left the Temple and moved with Mary to lodgings in Dalston, then semi-rural. Secondly, he prepared a collected edition of his *Works*.

Originally published in two volumes by C. & J. Ollier in 1818, this collection has since appeared in a variety of formats — extended over anything up to twelve volumes — often along with a *Life* and Lamb's *Letters*, and in some cases even the works of Mary Lamb. Perhaps the most accessible editions are the two edited by E. V. Lucas and published by Methuen at the beginning of this century (1903-5, seven volumes; 1912, six volumes). Posthumous editions, of course, usually include Lamb's post-1818 works and, should



This picture shows Christ's Hospital School, where Lamb studied.

you decide to invest in a set, first consider whether you want his *Life*, *Letters* and *Elia* in this composite form, or would prefer to have them separately.

These desert years saw two surprising developments in Lamb's life. The first occurred in 1819 when this dyed-in-the-wool bachelor proposed marriage, by letter, to a lady who refused the honour by return of post (you can read about her, under the pseudonym of 'Barbara S', in *The Last Essays of Elia*). Perhaps stranger was Charles' and Mary's decision to adopt a daughter. So, if you harbour the suspicion that Charles Lamb was a boring old fart — think again!



Another of A. Garth Jones's illustrations from the 1902 *Elia*.

If you need proof that he wasn't, then I recommend that you sample his excellent *Letters*, which have been reissued many times since 1852. Dent's excellent (and cheap) two-volume 'Everyman's Library' edition is perhaps the most accessible although, as this first appeared in 1909, it doesn't contain the batch of 200 or so letters which have since come to light.

The climactic event of Lamb's life occurred in 1820. This was the revival of the *London Magazine* under the direction of John Scott, an

editor of genius, who at once invited Lamb to become a regular contributor and who had the perceptiveness to give his creativity free rein.

The time had arrived for which the whole of Lamb's preceding 45 years had been but a preparation! Scott promptly got involved in a silly quarrel and was mortally wounded in the subsequent duel but, happily, his successor was too idle to review his decisions, and confined his own activities to lunching his contributors. The August 1820 issue of the magazine included Lamb's essay 'The South Sea House' — and the boundaries of English literature were at once extended!

## PSEUDONYM

Lamb adopted the pseudonym of 'Elia' for these essays, at first taking every care to conceal his identity, but later allowing his authorship to become an open secret. For the first time in his life he was free from money worries, a regular twenty guineas (£21) from the magazine supplementing his salary from India House, which now amounted to £600. He had also become a person of note, one famous in the literary world. This seems to have given him both confidence and inspiration, for it is in the *Essays of Elia* that Lamb's delightful personality — sincere and benevolent — finally emerges.

This is one of those books that accompanies the reader throughout life. It is not enough to read it once and then return it to the lender; you must have your own copy, kept handy, to take down again and again, and to lend to those you care for most. It is an example of that rare thing: a work that can truly be said to enhance the lives of those who read it.

To be accurate, it is actually two books, although they are often bound together in a single volume. Only the first is properly titled the *Essays of Elia*. Originally published in

1823, this contains Lamb's own selection of 28 essays — most of them from the *London Magazine* — which undoubtedly comprise his best work. If you cannot find (or afford) a contemporary copy, then seek out Methuen's beautifully-bound edition of 1902 — lovingly edited by E. V. Lucas and illustrated by A. Garth Jones — which follows the 1823 text.

The sequel, *Last Essays of Elia*, first appeared in 1833 and contains 39 essays, including a group of sixteen that are much shorter than the others. Although definitely taking second place behind its eminent predecessor, it nonetheless contains some excellent work. However, it is seldom seen on its own these days, the two collections usually being combined in single-volume editions. You should have no difficulty in finding one of these — indeed, you will be spoiled for choice. One worth looking out for, though, is Dent's 'Everyman's Library' edition, first published in 1906 and reissued umpteen times since. This little gem even comes in a gold blocked, leather-bound version with gilt top and rounded corners, and this seldom sells for more than a few pounds.

Of the illustrated editions, two of the finest are those published by Frederick A. Stokes of New York in 1894, with 31 half-tone

plates by Frederick C. Gordon; and by Methuen in 1902, with numerous charming engravings by A. Garth Jones.

Lamb did produce other work after the 'Elia' essays, but he never surpassed them, and it is upon *Tales from Shakespear*, *Elia* and his *Letters* that his reputation rests today. His other work is really only for scholars or dedicated admirers, and newcomers should read the major titles before sampling it.

The success that Lamb achieved within his lifetime was 'of the intellect rather than of the world' — that is, the sort you cannot pay into the bank! Except for his later years, when he and Mary lived together in a rented cottage in Islington, his entire life was spent either in lodgings or — as a child — in servants' quarters. Their few possessions were easily moved from one home to the next on an open cart, and most had been sold before his death.

He was even denied the luxury of dying in his own bed. That had been disposed of before, one winter's day in 1834, while taking a stroll, he fell and had to be helped home. Presumably he grazed or cut his skin, for infection developed and, within days, he was dead. Mary, who cared for him to the end, survived her brother until 1847.

## CHARLES LAMB UK BIBLIOGRAPHY

A guide to current values of books in Good (pre-1900) to Very Good condition in original cloth/boards.

### MAJOR WORKS

TALES FROM SHAKESPEAR (with Mary Lamb; two volumes) (Hodgkins, 1807) .....	the set £750-£2,000+
ditto. Arthur Rackham edition (Dent: 'Temple Classics', 1899) .....	£30-£50
ditto. 1909 Trade Edition (Dent, 1909) .....	£100-£150+
ditto. 1909 De-Luxe Edition (edition limited to 750 numbered copies)	
(Dent, 1909) .....	£500-£800+
THE ESSAYS OF ELIA (anonymous; boards) (Taylor & Hessey, 1823) .....	£500-£800+
ditto (with an introduction by E. V. Lucas) (Methuen, 1902) .....	£10-£20
ditto (including 'Last Essays'; with an introduction by Augustine Birrell)	
(Dent: 'Everyman Library', 1906) .....	£2-£4
THE LAST ESSAYS OF ELIA (boards) (Moxon, 1833) .....	£400-£600+
ELIA. First [and Second] Series (first authorised collected edition; two volumes)	
(Moxon, 1835) .....	the set £40-£60
THE LETTERS OF CHARLES LAMB With a Sketch of his Life. Edited by Thomas Talfourd (two volumes)	
(Moxon, 1837) .....	the set £100-£150+
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ditto (incorporating both the above; edited by Ernest Rhys; two volumes)	
(Dent: 'Everyman Library', 1909) .....	£2-£4
ditto ('The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb'; edited by E. V. Lucas; three volumes)	
(Dent/Methuen, 1935) .....	the set £50-£80

*continued overleaf*

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ditto. ditto (as 'The Life, Letters and Writings of Charles Lamb'; edited by Percy Fitzgerald; six volumes)  
(Moxon, 1876) ..... the set £40-£60  
ditto. C. E. Brock edition (illustrated by C. E. Brock; twelve volumes) (Dent, 1903) ..... the set £80-£100  
ditto. Large Paper Edition of above (edition limited to 200 sets; illustrated by C. E. Brock; twelve  
volumes; vellum-backed buckram) (Dent, 1903) ..... the set £300-£400  
ditto. ditto (as 'The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb'; edited by E. V. Lucas; seven volumes)  
(Methuen, 1903-5) ..... the set £150-£250

## OTHER WORKS

- POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (includes four sonnets by Lamb, signed  
'C.L.') (Cottle, Bristol, 1796) ..... £1,000-£1,500+  
BLANK VERSE by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd (includes Lamb's 'Old Familiar Faces')  
(T. Bensley, 1798) ..... £300-£400  
A TALE OF ROSAMUND GRAY AND OLD BLIND MARGARET: A Prose Romance  
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JOHN WOODVIL (blank verse play) (Privately printed, 1802) ..... £500-£800+  
THE KING AND QUEEN OF HEARTS (children's verses; wrappers)  
(Godwin's 'Juvenile Library', 1805) ..... £800-£1,000+  
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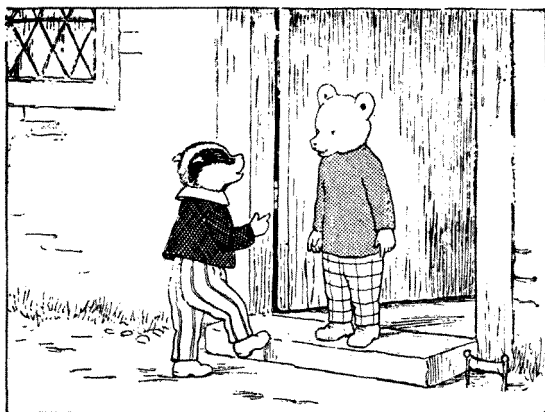
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**S**o wrote Lord Dunsany in the introduction to his short story collection, *The Book of Wonder*, published two years before the outbreak of the Great War, which was to make humankind yet more weary of life on this spoil and polluted planet.

Dealing in a unique fashion with what he called "the mysterious kingdoms where geography ends and fairyland begins", Dunsany wrote some of the best fantastic tales in the English language, and was undoubtedly one of the great formative influences in the development of the supernatural genre. Innumerable writers, from Tolkien and Lovecraft to many of today's masters of fantasy, have fallen under his spell. And many readers prefer him to all of these authors — including Tolkien.

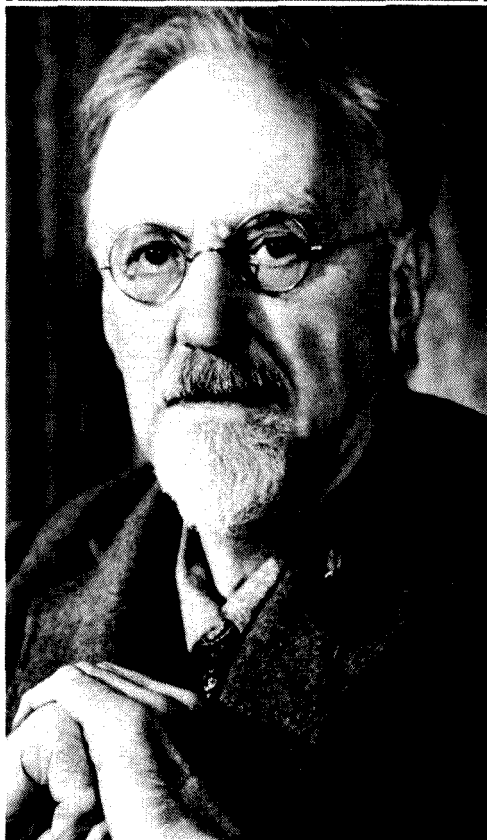
### VERSATILE

Dunsany was also an amazingly prolific and versatile writer, moving from the wonderland fantasies of his early years to lyric poetry, literary essays, political satires, novels of Irish life and humorous detective stories. He was also an outstanding dramatist, his bizarre plays anticipating the theatre of the absurd. However, all his work is characterised by one aspect of his personality: his marked distaste for modernity and mechanisation.

Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett — always known as 'Eddie' to his friends — was born in London on 24th July 1878, to an Anglo-Irish family that could trace its ancestry back to the tenth century. They had lived in Dunsany Castle, Co. Meath, for over 700 years, although Eddie spent the greater part of his life at his other family home, Dunstall Priory in Kent.

The first of his works to appear in print was a poem, 'Rhymes from a Suburb', which was included in the September 1897 issue of *Pall Mall Magazine*. It was the only one of his

# LORD DUNSANY



**RICHARD DALBY PROFILES  
THE GREAT FANTASY WRITER**

writings to be published under the name 'Edward Plunkett'.

After Eton (where he excelled at chess and cricket, but not literature) and Sandhurst, he became the 18th Baron Dunsany on his father's death in 1899. In the same year, he joined the Coldstream Guards, and fought

with them in the Boer War, serving for a time as assistant Press Censor in Cape Town.

Then it was back to the traditional life of hunting and shooting in Ireland, and of social gatherings in fashionable London — where, as a gregarious, personable, tall (six foot, four inches) and eligible young peer, he was asked ‘everywhere’, happily unaware that his off-the-peg clothes had earned him the reputation of being “the worst-dressed man in Ireland”!

On 15th July 1904, he proposed to Beatrice Villers, daughter of the Earl of Jersey, and they married exactly two months later. They had one son, Randal (the present Lord Dunsany), in 1906.

## TALES

Through his mother, Dunsany was related to Sir Richard Burton, translator of the *Arabian Nights*, and as a boy he avidly read these stories, as well as the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and Perrault, and the Authorised Version of the Bible (the prose style of which he adored — and copied).

He was inspired to become a fantasy writer after seeing David Belasco’s play, *The Darling of the Gods* — set in a timeless, mythical Japan — in 1903. During the following year, he wrote 31 ‘tales’, as he always preferred to call them (although most were much more like ‘prose-poems’), the first of many hundreds that were to pour from his pen over the next half-a-century.

This early sequence of vignettes compris-



One of Sidney H. Sime's atmospheric illustrations for Lord Dunsany's third collection of stories, *The Sword of Welleran* (George Allen, 1908).

ing a ‘new theology’ of ancient and distant times was called *The Gods of Pegana*, and marked the beginning of a remarkable partnership with Sidney H. Sime, widely considered to be the greatest imaginative artist of his generation.

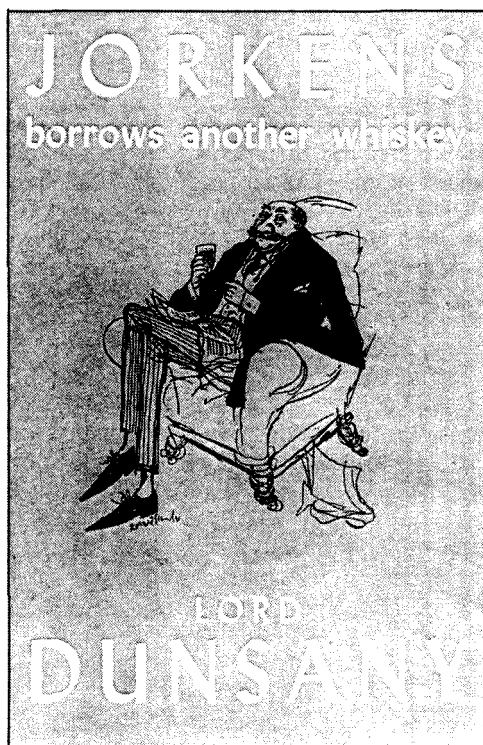
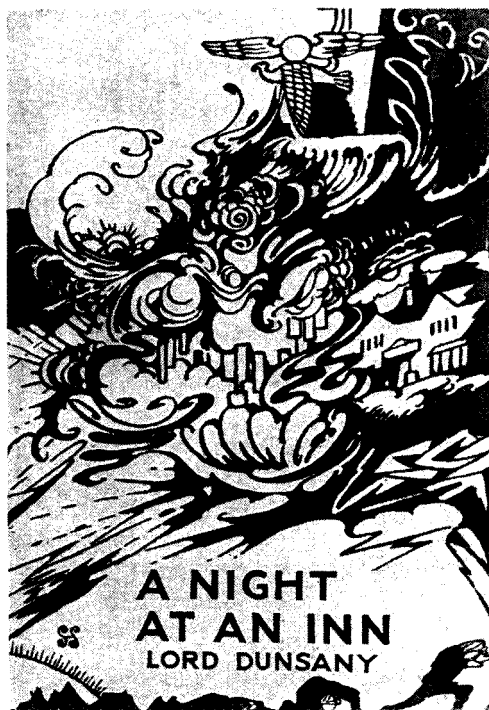
In fact, when Dunsany had completed the manuscript, he could think of only two artists

capable of portraying his strange dream-world: Sidney Sime and the late Gustave Doré. Sime was delighted to undertake this commission. "This remarkable man consented to do me eight illustrations," wrote Dunsany in his autobiography (which contained a full chapter on Sime), "and I have never seen a black-and-white artist with a more stupendous imagination."

*The Gods of Pegana* was published at 6/- in October 1905. "I paid for the publication of my first book; indeed I paid for it twice, for I took it to two publishers and only the second one, Mr. Elkin Mathews, published it. But never since then have I spent a penny on anything I have written, believing that such things should make their own way in the world." (Apparently the first publisher went bust and disappeared with Dunsany's money.)

The book was very well received, and immediately gained many admirers, including William Randolph Hearst, who actually

*Sime also drew the cover for Putnam's 'acting edition' of Dunsany's play, A Night at an Inn. The work was a huge hit on both sides of the Atlantic.*



*The irrepressible Joseph Jorkens is one of Dunsany's finest creations. Ronald Searle drew the cover picture for the last of five collections of his tall tales.*

coaxed Sime to America for a retainer of £800 a year.

Fortunately, Sime returned to Britain after six months, and illustrated Dunsany's next collection, *Time and the Gods* (William Heinemann, 1906; ten plates). Dunsany usually dictated these early tales to his wife Beatrice. They seemed to be almost supernatural in inspiration, "coming so suddenly and so fervently and from no source that I know of . . . the ideas appeared to come from so far outside me, and even to be remote from all my experience."

H. P. Lovecraft, one of his most devoted admirers, perfectly summed up Dunsany's unique genius: "Inventor of a new mythology and weaver of surprising folklore, Lord Dunsany stands dedicated to a strange world of fantastic beauty, and pledged to eternal warfare against the coarseness and ugliness

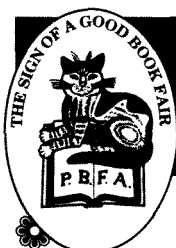


of diurnal reality. His point of view is the most truly cosmic of any held in the literature of any period. As sensitive as Poe to dramatic values and the significance of isolated words and details, and far better equipped rhetorically through a simple lyric style based on the prose of the King James Bible, this author draws with tremendous effectiveness on nearly every body of myth and legend within the circle of European culture; producing a composite or eclectic cycle of fantasy in which Eastern colour, Hellenic form, Teutonic sombreness and Celtic wistfulness are so superbly blended that each sustains and supplements the rest without sacrifice of perfect congruity and homogeneity. In most cases Dunsany's lands are fabulous — 'beyond the East', or 'at the edge of the world'. His system of original personal and place names, with roots drawn from classical, Oriental, and other sources, is a marvel of versatile inventiveness and poetic discrimination; as one may see from such specimens as 'Argimenes', 'Bethmoora', 'Poltarnees', 'Camorak', 'Iluriei', or 'Sardathrion'."

When he gave up dictating his stories, Dunsany became addicted to writing with a large quill, which made his autograph (seen on the frontispiece of *Fifty-One Tales* and the cover of *Tales of War*) and his innumerable letters and manuscripts so full-bodied and distinctive. With his beloved quill, he was able to write with ease, great speed and confidence — "I never rewrite and I never correct!" he once boldly declared.

## VILLAINOUS

In 1906, Dunsany bought an unforgettable picture by Sime which had originally appeared in the December 1899 issue of the *Idler* magazine. Entitled 'Tom o'the Roads', it depicted a highwayman "much decomposed, hanging in chains, while three villainous people in ancient hats came by the light of such a moon apparently to cut the man down". It inspired his first story to feature human characters rather than Gods, 'The Highwaymen', and appeared in his third collection, *The Sword of Welleran* (George Allen and Sons, 1908; ten plates by Sime). The stories in this volume,



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## MAY BOOK FAIRS

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| 7     | <b>DUMFRIES,</b><br>Minerva Hall, Dumfries Academy                           | 10am-5pm                          |
| 7     | <b>HENLEY,</b><br>The Town Hall  | 10am-5pm                          |
| 8-9   | <b>LONDON,</b><br>Hotel Russell, Russell Square, WC1                         | 2pm-7pm; 10.30am-7pm. <i>Free</i> |
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- |       |   |                          |
|-------|---|--------------------------|
| 14    | <b>BRIGHTON,</b><br>Friends Meeting House, Ship Street                | 10am-5pm                 |
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| 20-21 | <b>BRISTOL,</b><br>The Victoria Rooms, Queens Road                    | 2pm-7pm; 10am-5pm        |
| 22    | <b>OXFORD ACADEMIC,</b><br>Linton Lodge Hotel, Linton Road            | 11am-4pm                 |
| 24    | <b>LONDON CITY MARKET,</b><br>St. Olave's Parish Hall, Mark Lane, EC3 | 10am-6pm. <i>Free</i>    |
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| 28    | <b>NANTWICH,</b><br>The Civic Hall                                    | 10am-4pm                 |
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with their jewelled, quasi-biblical prose and Celtic imagination, won the author yet more admirers. Dunsany was fast becoming a 'cult'.

The first editions of these three titles, bound in vulnerable cloth-backed boards, are rarely found in Very Good condition. The boards, originally strong, were not designed to weather the next nine decades as effectively as their human contemporaries! The joints are also very prone to wear and splitting. I've seen battered copies priced as low as 50p-£5 each, whereas the much more elusive specimens in Very Good-Fine condition would sell for nearer £40-£80.

*A Dreamer's Tales* (George Allen and Sons, 1910), with nine illustrations by Sime, focused on familiar themes like the fall of cities or the inexorable power of time, but with slightly more emphasis on plot than before.

## APOGEE

The collaboration of Sime and Dunsany reached its apogee in the next collection, *The Book of Wonder*, probably because the artist was given a completely free rein. Sime was becoming frustrated with magazine editors who would not offer him suitable subjects for illustration, and so Dunsany said: "Why not do any pictures you like, and I will write stories explaining them, which may add a little to their mystery?"

Sime then produced ten of his most bizarre and elaborate pictures, which are so well mirrored in Dunsany's subsequent tales that the reverse order of production is not apparent. Sime's wonderful illustrations were first published to great effect in *The Sketch* (December 1910 to March 1911), before being collected in *The Book of Wonder* (William Heinemann, 1912).

Their sixth collaboration — originally called 'The Last Book of Wonder' when it appeared in *The Sketch* (May-June 1914) — was published by Elkin Mathews as *Tales of Wonder* in October 1916. The book included a pithy and succinct preface by Dunsany: "These tales are tales of peace. Those who remember peace and those who will see it again may be glad to turn their eyes, though but for a moment, away from a world of mud and blood and khaki, and to



*The Man who Ate the Phoenix* ([1949]) brings together forty of Dunsany's later short stories. Copies now fetch up to £30 in the superb pictorial dustjacket.

read for a while of cities too good to be true."

Dunsany's most beautiful and desirable book is *The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth* (a tale from *The Sword of Welleran*), decorated by W. F. Northend and printed by him at the School of Art Press. Similar in presentation to a Kelmescott Press volume, although in a smaller format, this was issued in an edition of only thirty numbered copies, dated 18th March 1910. These turn up very rarely today, and when they do, usually sell in the £350-£500 price range.

Equally sought-after, but much cheaper, is the Cuala Press *Selections from the Writings of Lord Dunsany* (1912), limited to 250 copies, and featuring a nine-page introduction by W. B. Yeats. This book contains three tales, extracts from two others, and one-and-a-half plays.

Dunsany was persuaded by Yeats to write a series of plays, all with fantasy settings, for

the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. The first of these, *The Glittering Gate* — about two dead burglars who attempt to break through the gateway into Heaven, only to find empty night and stars on the other side — premièred there on 29th April 1909. This was followed by the very popular *King Argimenes and the Unknown Warrior* on 29th January 1911.

His next two plays — *The Gods of the Mountain* (seven beggars pass themselves off as Gods, who take revenge by turning them to stone) and *The Golden Doom* — were more elaborate and were both premièred at London's Haymarket Theatre, on 1st June 1911 and 19th November 1912 respectively. They were praised for their ironic elements of humour and horror. A very young Claude Rains appeared in both these productions, over twenty years before his Hollywood debut. Dunsany's fifth drama, *The Lost Silk Hat*, opened at the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester on 4th August 1913.

## FRONTISPIECE

These were all collected together as *Five Plays*, published by Grant Richards in February 1914, with a frontispiece (repeated on the dustjacket) by Ilbery Lynch. This collection was reprinted several times (later by Putnam's), reaching its seventh impression by 1925. In 1916, Dunsany became the only playwright ever to have five plays — all those mentioned above — running simultaneously on Broadway.

The 'Gods' in Dunsany's plays are usually invincible and terrible, and this theme is memorably repeated in one of his best-known dramas, *A Night at an Inn* — written at a single sitting on 17th January 1912! In this, four merchant sailors who have stolen a precious ruby — the eye of an Indian idol — are pursued to an inn by three vengeful priests. The latter are murdered by the sailors, but then the blind idol gropingly appears and reclaims its eye, and the four robbers in turn meet their ghastly retribution offstage. Since its 1916 debut in America (where it was phenomenally successful and popular — "the first audience was half-hysterical with excitement for the play is stirring beyond belief" [*New York Times*] — and was speedily

published in book form by the The Sunwise Turn in New York), *A Night at an Inn* has been endlessly revived and performed all over the world in amateur theatres, colleges, schools, prisons and other institutions. Like most of his other plays, it was subsequently reissued by Putnam's in a one-shilling, paperback 'acting edition', with a suitably weird cover by Sime, and passed through many (usually undated) impressions. It was also included in the 1917 collection, *Plays of Gods and Men*.

In 1917, Edward Bierstadt extolled the writer's merits in a volume called *Dunsany the Dramatist*, and boldly asserted: "The three great contemporary dramatic poets of Ireland are Synge, Dunsany and Yeats."

During the Great War, Dunsany — together with his two footmen — served with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. In 1916, soon after the death of his mother, he was caught up in the Easter Rebellion in Dublin, and was shot in the head by a sniper. Half the bullet was immediately dug out by a fellow officer, and the other half was extracted in hospital. The incident left him permanently scarred, but not disfigured. Six months later he was passed fit for general service, and fought in Flanders before joining the War Office branch known as M17.B. (i), which was responsible for the production of pro-British propaganda.

Part of his job was to write patriotic sketches and tales, which appeared in a number of British and American newspapers before being published in book form as *Tales of War* (1918), *Unhappy Far-Off Things* (1919) and *Tales of Three Hemispheres* (U.S., 1919/U.K., 1920). The front cover of *Tales of War* carries a facsimile of Dunsany's autograph next to

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a subtle emblem depicting his quill crossed with a sword. Dunsany's 'A Dirge Of Victory' was the only poem selected for publication in the *Times* on Armistice Day 1918.

Late in 1919, he embarked on his first big lecture tour of America. Seated eagerly in the front row at one of these lectures, at the Copley-Plaza Hotel in Boston, was H. P. Lovecraft. The effect on the young man was overwhelming, and inspired him to produce a spate of Dunsanian stories — over a dozen in number — including 'The White Ship' and 'The Doom that Came to Sarnath'.

With his outlook soured by the war, Dunsany turned to a new medium: the novel. The first three — *The Chronicles of Rodriguez* (1922), *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924) and *The Charwoman's Shadow* (1926) — were again set in fantasy worlds, but were far less light-hearted than his pre-war tales, and were all overshadowed by evil.

*The Chronicles of Rodriguez* is a picaresque comedy-adventure set in a mythical Spain, and has been compared to *Don Quixote*. *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, an allegorical fairy story

featuring a beautiful princess and prince, trolls and a magic sword, was Dunsany's own personal favourite among his novels, described by him as "nearer to verse than most I have written". *The Charwoman's Shadow* (1926) returns to a pseudo-medieval Spain, and is an intricate tale of sorcery involving the recovery of shadows stolen by a magician.

*The Blessing of Pan* (1927) was Dunsany's first fantasy novel to have a contemporary and realistic setting (the countryside described is very like that surrounding his home, Dunstall Priory), describing a vicar's struggle with paganism in 'modern-day' Kent. This time the reviews were not so favourable, most critics deploring the ultimate triumph of Pan.

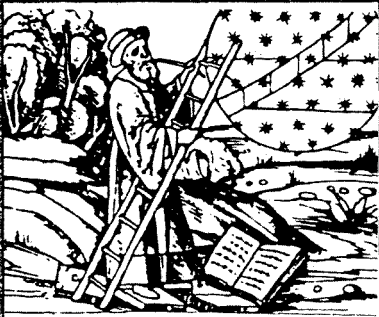
## VELLUM

All four of these books carried a frontispiece by Sime, but no further plates. Apparently the publishers — G.P. Putnam's Sons — said they could not afford more than one illustration for each of his books (which were published at the same price as his very first volumes — 6/-). However, they did produce limited 'Editions de Luxe' of both *The Chronicles of Rodriguez* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, signed by the author and artist, and bound in half vellum.

Even more exceptional was Putnam's new edition of *Time and the Gods* (1922). Similarly vellum-backed and limited to 250 copies, this was not only signed by Dunsany (on the Preface) but also by the indefatigable Sime — on *each* of the ten plates! Published at three guineas, this collector's item can now fetch in excess of £200 in Fine condition.

G. P. Putnam's Sons continued to be the main publisher of Dunsany's plays throughout the 1920s, issuing both standard and Large Paper limited (but unsigned) editions of the popular *If* (1921), *Plays of Near and Far* (1922), *Alexander*, and *Three Small Plays* (1925) and *Seven Modern Comedies* (1928). All the plays were published separately in 1/- paperback 'acting editions' sporting decorated wrappers.

Putnam's also issued *Fifty Poems* in 1929, in both a trade and limited (250 copies) edition. Dunsany's fantasy, *Lord Adrian*, a play in three acts, was published by the Golden Cockerel Press in 1933. This finely-produced



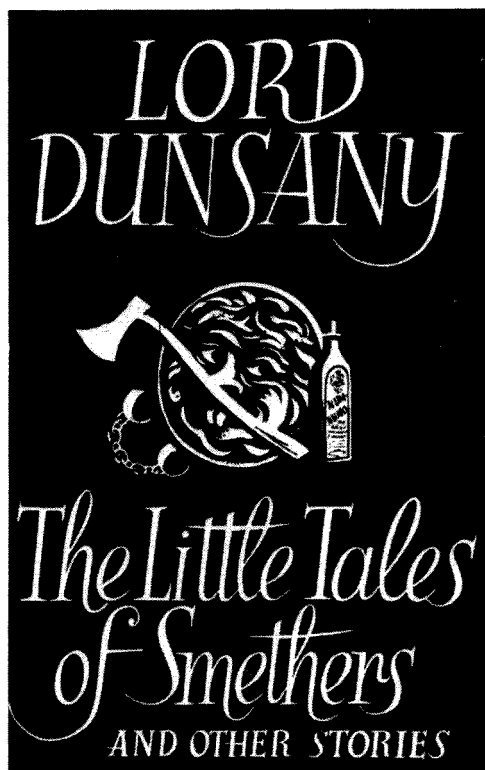
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*The Little Tales of Smethers* (1952) was described as "a treasure-trove" by Ellery Queen. It contains 26 tales, including the classic, 'The Two Bottles of Relish'.

volume was limited to 325 copies and included several wood engravings by Robert Gibbings.

In 1932, Dunsany realised that the reading public were increasingly coming to prefer grisly murder stories to his more delicate fantasies, and so he decided to write a tale "gruesome enough for them". The result was 'The Two Bottles of Relish', a sickeningly clever story of how a man disposes of a woman's body — leaving no trace . . .

In fact, this piece was considered so horrifying that at first no magazine editor in Britain or America would publish it. Eventually it was accepted by Lady Rhondda, editor

of *Time and Tide*, appearing in the issue dated 12th-19th November 1932. Dunsany later claimed that Lady Rhondda, who was a militant feminist, published the tale because she believed that it accurately reflected "just how men do treat women"!

The "widespread nausea" (Dunsany's own phrase) soon evaporated and 'The Two Bottles of Relish' has subsequently become his best known and most anthologised short story, opening the door to numerous (equally yucky) 'tales of the unexpected', in a similar vein to Roald Dahl's 'Lamb to the Slaughter' and Stanley Ellin's 'Speciality of the House'.

Dunsany's career as a short-story writer had gained fresh impetus in 1926 with the publication in the *Atlantic Monthly* of 'The Tale of the Abu Laheeb', the first of a very long series of fantastic, Münchhausen-like 'tall stories' related by the irrepressible (and irresistible) Joseph Jorkens, as he sits with his cronies and his whiskey at the Billiards Club.

## IMPROBABLE

Whatever the subject under discussion — travel, crime, ghosts or incredible inventions — Jorkens has an anecdote about it. His improbable stories are always convincing, and his listeners know that they will never catch him out. Most of these tales have an uproarious twist in the last line, and all are told with Dunsany's customary light and delicate touch, with a note of horror occasionally creeping in to grow in the reader's memory and imagination.

The Jorkens tales enjoyed enormous critical and popular success — more than Dunsany's pre-war fantasies ever did. They were first published in — amongst other magazines — *Harper's*, the *Graphic*, the *Spectator*, *Pall Mall* and *Britannia and Eve*, and were collected in five volumes published over a period of twenty years. These were: *The Travel Tales of Mr. Joseph Jorkens* (1931); *Jorkens Remembers Africa* (1934); *Jorkens Has a Large*

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*Whiskey* (1940); *The Fourth Book of Jorkens* (1947; and Arkham House, U.S., 1948) and *Jorkens Borrows Another Whiskey* (1954).

Dunsany's novels of the 1930s brought him to the first rank of modern Irish literature. *The Curse of the Wise Woman* (1933) is the most autobiographical and enduring of all his longer works. Richly evocative of the Meath countryside, it tells the story of a lonely boy and a mysterious 'Wise Woman' (representing the spirit of the Irish motherland). Her curse is directed at the English 'invaders', who intend to drain the bog and "compress the turf by machinery and sell it as coal". This novel won the Harmsworth Award for "the best work of imaginative prose by an Irish author", and was described by Seamus Heaney (the *Listener*, 28 September 1972) as "a myth for the shaping of modern Ireland".

## SATIRE

His next novel, *Up in the Hills* (1935), was another light-hearted satire on the Irish 'Troubles'. He was then asked to write a volume of reminiscences, *My Ireland*, which proved to be his greatest success so far, receiving enthusiastic reviews and passing through several editions.

The mid-Thirties also saw the peak of Dunsany's 'Great Canine Period', with the publication of *Mr. Faithful* (1935), a brilliant full-length comedy in which the hero takes a job as a dog; *Rory and Bran* (1936), the story of an Irish boy and his silent companion, Bran, cunningly written so that the latter's true identity is not revealed until the final chapter; and *My Talks with Dean Spanley* (1936) in which a cleric imagines himself in a former incarnation as a spaniel — a marvellously funny portrait of someone who has literally led "a dog's life". This book marked Sime's swansong, with a jacket portrait of Spanley and a spectacular frontispiece of a moonlit woodland scene.

A later fantasy on the same theme was *The Strange Journeys of Colonel Polders*, where a man's mind enters the heads of various animals, sharing their adventures and outlook on life. *The Story of Mona Sheehy* (1939), concerning a girl who is thought to be the daughter of fairies, was described by Graham

**THE**

# POETRY REVIEW

*Established 1909*

Vol. XLIV      JULY-SEPTEMBER 1938      No. 3

*In this Issue—*

## LORD DUNSANY AGAIN

—and Thirty Poems: "Dylan Thomas  
Yes and No": and Eight Prizes for Poets

**The Official Publication of the Poetry Society**

*Three Shillings and Sixpence*

*Dunsany was a frequent contributor to many magazines — perhaps too frequent, judging by the billing on the cover of this copy of the Poetry Review!*

Greene (in the *Spectator*) as "a delightful book belonging to the disputable territory between fancy and imagination, full of underground malice and quite free from whimsy — a difficult achievement".

1938 was an especially busy year for Dunsany, seeing not only his television debut (on *The Brains Trust*), the première of a new play, *The Strange Lover* (in which a mysterious Yorkshire millionaire creates a *Frankenstein*-like monster), and a very successful revival of *Alexander* — starring Donald Wolfit — at the Malvern Festival, but also the publication of his first volume of autobiography, *Patches of Sunlight*, covering his life up to 1918. This enthralling memoir includes chapters on sport and travel, big-game hunting in Africa, and the Great War.

In the winter of 1940/1, Dunsany and his wife took a circuitous journey to Greece (not yet at war) following his appointment as

Byron Professor of English Literature at Athens University. Here he lectured two or three times a week to the enthusiastic, pro-British students. After the Nazis invaded the country, the Dunsanys effectively disappeared without trace, and very little was heard of them until they reappeared in Dublin early in 1942. Steering clear of the enemy, they had taken over nine months to reach Scotland by sea via Egypt, Aden, South Africa and the Atlantic.

## POEMS

On his return to England, Dunsany became a volunteer in the Home Guard. During the remaining years of the war, he wrote more poems "than in all the rest of my life put together" — sometimes as many as one a day. These appeared in the *Evening News*, *Evening Standard* and *Sunday Express*. He also published two more volumes of autobiography, *While the Sirens Slept* (1944) and *The Sirens Wake* (1945); *Guerrilla* (1944) a thriller about the Resistance in Greece (although the country is never named) and his only truly realistic novel; *Wandering Songs* (1943), a collection of poems written during his travels in Greece, Turkey and Egypt, and on board the refugee boat; and two long poems, *The Journey* (1944) and *The Year* (1946). In 1943, he delivered the Donnellan Lectures on prose, poetry and drama at Trinity College, Dublin; these were published in 1945.

After the war, Dunsany often spoke out against the decay of the English language, the evils of advertising, the cutting off of horses' and dogs' tails, and above all, the supposed decadence and 'obscurity' of modern poetry, sensibly championing Walter de la Mare as

"the greatest living poet in English". Although he realised that his own verses could never compare with de la Mare's, he was not so modest about his novels and short stories, commenting: "I can't think of any great prose writers who have come up to the standards I have set for prose." Many of his admirers would agree with this sentiment.

From 1939 onwards, Dunsany was one of the most regular contributors to *Punch*, and his works appeared in almost all the popular post-war magazines, including the *Countryman*, *Poetry Review*, *John Bull*, *Lilliput* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. He made lecture tours to America in 1953, 1954 and 1955, but was less successful in getting his books issued there. His last seven works (1949 to 1954) all failed to find an American publisher.

## INGENIOUS

Among these were: *The Man Who Ate the Phoenix* (1949), a collection of 40 supernatural, mystical and humorous short stories reprinted from *Punch*, the London *Evening News* and other journals; and *The Last Revolution* (1951), an ingenious science fiction novel describing the revolt of all the world's machines against their human creators, led by a Frankenstein-like beast of steel and wire.

*The Little Tales of Smethers* (1952) was one of the titles included in Ellery Queen's "History of the Crime Short Story", *Queen's Quorum*. The editors wrote that: "This book is a treasure-trove — no less than 26 tales of crime and detection, all illumined by Lord Dunsany's charm and wit, and his individualistic style." The first nine stories record the

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exploits of Mr. Linley of Scotland Yard, beginning with the classic 'The Two Bottles of Relish'.

Dunsany's last book was *Jorkens Borrows Another Whiskey* (1954). The jacket illustration of Jorkens by Ronald Searle is repeated on the frontispiece and at the head of each story. Active to the end, Dunsany died suddenly on 25th October 1957 in a Dublin hospital, following an operation on his appendix.

The first major work to be written about the author after his death was *Lord Dunsany: King of Dreams, 'A Personal Portrait'* by Hazel Littlefield (Exposition Press, U.S., 1959). This is a fascinating and detailed account of Littlefield's friendship with Dunsany during his final years, when he was a frequent visitor to her home, Ming Manor, in California.

The nearest approach to a definitive biography is Mark Amory's *Lord Dunsany*, published by Collins in 1972. In spite of lax editing and a muddled bibliography, this remains the most comprehensive account of his life to date.

## REISSUES

Two of Dunsany's novels were reissued by Collins to coincide with the publication of Amory's biography: *My Talks with Dean Spanley* and *The Curse of the Wise Woman*. Astonishingly, the latter is now the only one of Lord Dunsany's books still in print! Apart from Collins, British publishers have completely neglected him over the past thirty years.

However — proving the veracity of the old adage that "a prophet has no honour in his own country" — several of his classic novels and short stories have been reissued in the United States, usually in mass-market paperback editions, and most of these have been widely distributed in the United Kingdom. Of particular note are three collections assembled by Lin Carter for the Ballantine 'Adult Fantasy' series — *The Edge of the World* (1970), *Beyond the Fields We Know* (1972) and *Over the Hills and Far Away* (1974) — and the Dover edition of *Gods, Men and Ghosts: The Best Supernatural Fiction of Lord Dunsany* (1972), which includes twenty illustrations by Sidney Sime.

## THE GHOSTS OF THE HEAVISIDE LAYER and Other Fantasms



by Lord Dunsany

*This is perhaps the most desirable of the recent Dunsany anthologies. It contains story, essays and two plays, as well as several illustrations by Tim Kirk.*

The most handsome Dunsany edition to appear in recent years is *The Ghosts of the Heaviside Layer and Other Fantasms* (Owlswick Press, U.S., 1980), an excellent compendium of previously uncollected rarities — stories, essays, and two plays (including the only modern reprinting of the neglected *Lord Adrian*). With illustrations by Tim Kirk and a foreword by Darrell Schweitzer, this was something of a bargain at only \$20, and Mint copies can still be found in this country for £15-£20.

Compiling a complete bibliography of all Dunsany's various writings in books, newspapers and magazines would seem to be an impossible task, but it has been triumphantly carried off by Darrell Schweitzer and S. T. Joshi in their 363-page *Lord Dunsany: A Bibliography* (Scarecrow Press, 1993), which was published in the U.K. on 24th February



this year. (Available from Shelwing Ltd., 127 Sandgate Road, Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BL; price £42.50). Although this bibliography does not describe the bindings, dustjackets and issue points of Dunsany's many first editions, it does list nearly all his contributions to periodicals, a staggering number of which have remained buried and forgotten in magazines like *Punch*, *Lilliput*, *Tomorrow* and *Men Only*.

A few were recently resurrected for the first time in a commemorative issue of *Weird Tales* (Spring 1993), including 'A Modern Portrait' (from *Punch*, 1946), 'Helping the Fairies' (*Strand*, 1947) and 'The Rations of Murdoch Finucan' (*Punch*, 1947).

Dunsany is now generally recognised as

the first great fantasist of the twentieth century — an unrivalled master of the comic and the macabre; a true original, like no other writer of his kind, past or present; and an unfailing source of delight.

"But no amount of mere description can convey more than a fraction of Lord Dunsany's pervasive charm," H. P. Lovecraft wrote of him. "His prismatic cities and unheard-of rites are touched with a sureness which only mastery can engender, and we thrill with a sense of actual participation in his secret mysteries. To the truly imaginative he is a talisman and a key unlocking rich storehouses of dream and fragmentary memory; so that we think of him not only as a poet, but as one who makes each reader a poet as well."

## LORD DUNSANY UK BIBLIOGRAPHY

A guide to current values of first editions in Very Good condition without/with dustjackets.  
U.S. editions are only mentioned if they were distributed in the U.K. and have no U.K. equivalent.

### FICTION: SHORT STORIES, TALES AND SKETCHES

THE GODS OF PEGANA (Elkin Mathews, 1905) .....	£60-£80
TIME AND THE GODS (W. Heinemann, 1906) .....	£40-£60
ditto. Limited Edition (edition limited to 250 copies, signed by Dunsany and Sime)	
(G. P. Putnam's, 1922 [January 1923]) .....	£200+
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continued overleaf

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(Scarecrow Press, U.S., 1993)	in print £42.50

## *In Next Month's Issue*

**THE UNKNOWN DASHIELL HAMMETT**  
**Victorian Novelist CHARLOTTE BRONTË**  
**ELIZABETH DAVID** *Cookery Writer*  
**Artist and Illustrator MICHAEL AYRTON**  
**RICHARD TOWNSHEND BICKERS** *Military Author*  
**Orkney Writer GEORGE MACKAY BROWN**  
**COLLECTING INCUNABULA**  
**LONDON BOOK FAIRS ISSUE**

# PETER O'DONNELL'S MODESTY BLAISE

BY MICHAEL RICHARDSON AND NEIL & SUE ALSOP

**S**he has featured in her own cartoon strip, two major films and in a string of successful novels. One of the great icons of the Sixties, she is still going strong after more than thirty years. She is the female hero, woman's answer to James Bond. She is, of course, Modesty Blaise, immortal creation of writer, Peter O'Donnell.

O'Donnell's notorious adventurer first appeared in picture-strip form on Monday 13th May 1963 in London's *Evening Standard* (now simply the *Standard*). This untitled story (it later became known as 'La Machine') ran for five months and set the scene for all the later exploits of Modesty Blaise and her loyal sidekick, Willie Garvin.

But what of the man who dreamed up these extraordinary characters? O'Donnell was born on 11th April 1920 in Lewisham, South London, and attended Hither Green Elementary School and Catford School. Leaving the latter at the age of seventeen, he followed in the footsteps of both his father and his brother and became a writer, beginning his career with Amalgamated Press (now IPC), creating stories for children's comics.



© Hulton Deutsch

On the outbreak of the Second World War two years later, he joined the Territorial Army unit of the Royal Corps of Signals. Despite this interruption, he had become well established as a comics writer by the

early 1950s, producing the strips 'Garth' and 'Romeo Brown' for the *Daily Mirror*, and 'Eve' and 'Tug Transom' for the *Daily Sketch*.

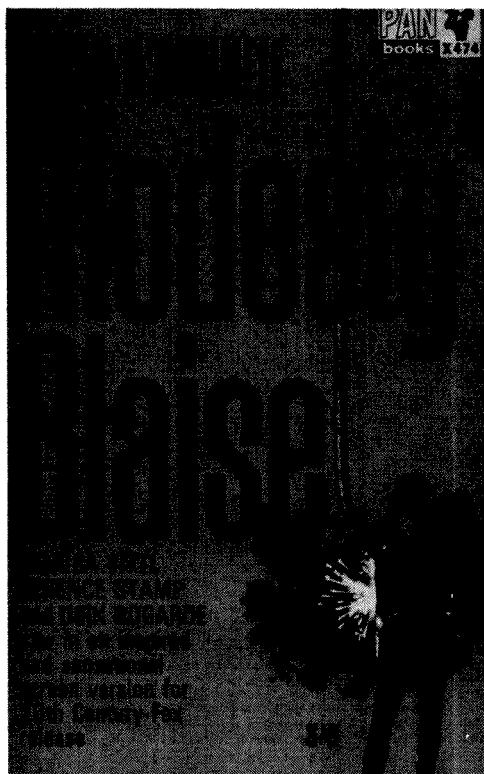
In 1962, he was approached by the cartoon editor of Beaverbrook Newspapers and asked to create a new and original picture strip. O'Donnell wanted this to reflect the changing role of women in society, and over the following months he came up with a heroine who was to inspire a radical re-evaluation of the place of female characters in adventure fiction: Modesty Blaise. When asked who he would like to draw the strip, he had no hesitation in recommending his friend, Jim Holdaway, with whom he had worked on 'Romeo Brown'.

The first story quickly established the characters of Modesty and Willie: both tough and resourceful, but subject to strong human emotions and by no means certain to triumph over evil. So successful was it that the strip was immediately syndicated out to a number of other newspapers. For them, O'Donnell wrote a short story entitled 'In the Beginning', which sheds some light on Modesty's background.

## WARTIME

This begins towards the end of the Second World War with a young orphan girl, so traumatised by her wartime experiences that she no longer even knows her own name, escaping from a prison camp in Greece. She learns to survive the hard way: by living off the land, begging and stealing. Crossing into Persia (now Iran), she moves from one displaced persons camp to another, in the interim periods staying with nomadic tribes or in crowded cities.

In one camp, she comes to the aid of an old man who has just been robbed of his food ration. She decides to take care of him, and the two of them travel together for several years throughout the Middle East. It is he that names her 'Modesty', because of her complete lack of inhibitions. He becomes her mentor, teaching her with whatever books she can buy or steal. Studying Arthurian legend, she reads about Merlin's tutor, Blaise, and adopts his name.



*The Pan tie-in edition of the first 'Modesty Blaise' novel, showing actress Monica Vitti on the cover.*

The old man dies when Modesty is about sixteen, and she ends up working for several years in a Tangiers casino run by a local gangster called Louche. During this period, she learns a lot about his business and is able to rally Louche's men after he is killed in a gang war, quickly proving herself to be a worthy replacement as their leader.

The gang grows and she is soon in control of her own criminal organisation known as the Network, with her influence spreading across the Middle East. However, she has certain moral standards, being strongly opposed to all forms of vice and drugs, and not hesitating to kill all those who deal in them.

She first sees Willie Garvin in a kick-boxing contest in Saigon, and it is not long before she finds herself bailing him out of jail. Out of gratitude to his 'Princess', as he calls

## MODESTY BLAISE

### THE IMPOSSIBLE VIRGIN



*In The Impossible Virgin, Modesty is subjected to horrific tortures by the sadistic villain, Brunel.*

her, he becomes her second-in-command until, six years later, they decide to 'retire', splitting up the Network between their various section chiefs and settling in London.

However, they soon miss the excitement of living 'on the edge' and before long are becoming involved in risky adventures, sometimes at the behest of Sir Gerald Tarrant of the British Secret Service.

Unlike the philandering James Bond, for whom sex is often merely a 'tool of his trade', Modesty's sexual encounters are selective and few, usually ending in friendship with the man involved. Although she will, if necessary, use her sexuality to save a life or triumph over her adversaries, the fact that she was raped as a child precludes casual intimacy for her. However, she has no qualms about using her naked body to give herself vital seconds when fighting male opponents.

By September 1964, the strip had become so popular that O'Donnell was approached

by a producer with the idea of turning it into a feature film. O'Donnell worked for several months on a screenplay, with Michael Carreras lined up as the director. British Lion brought the script, but replaced Carreras with Sydney Gilliat, who re-wrote it. The project was then taken on by a newly-formed production company, Modesty Blaise Ltd., who got rid of Gilliat and had the screenplay re-written five or six times by different people. Eventually, only one line of O'Donnell's original script was left in! Sensual Italian actress, Monica Vitti, was cast as Modesty, even though she needed voice training in English.

Sensing a potential 'hot property', Twentieth Century Fox stepped in to finance the project, assigning Joseph Losey as director, and casting rising star Terence Stamp as Willie Garvin and Dirk Bogarde as the villainous Gabriel. The resulting film, released in 1966, proved to be an undisciplined amalgam of camp spy escapade and chic 1960s pop art.

### CASTING

O'Donnell was unhappy with the finished product and particularly with the casting of the two leads. He would have preferred Julie Christie and Michael Caine, although on reflection he now feels that opting for complete unknowns would have been better. To prevent something similar happening again, O'Donnell bought Modesty Blaise Ltd., so acquiring all the film rights to the character.

While the film was in pre-production, several publishers expressed an interest in 'Modesty Blaise' novels. O'Donnell chose to sign with Ernest Hecht's independent Souvenir Press, which in turn led to a deal with Pan Books for paperback editions, to follow usually one or two years after the hardcovers.

Although he envisaged a completely original novel, the film's producers wanted him to adapt the script to tie-in with the movie's release. What he actually produced was a novelisation of his *original* script, before all the re-writes, which means that the finished book bears only a passing resemblance to the film.

The novel, like the movie, was simply entitled *Modesty Blaise*. The dustjacket of the hardback first edition, published by the Souvenir Press in 1965, features an abstract design, while the cover of the subsequent Pan paperback showed a suitably-costumed Monica Vitti superimposed against a burning fuse and a silver background.

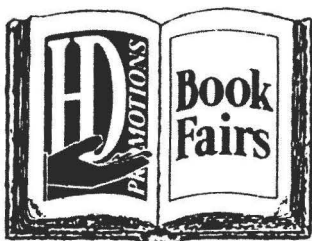
The story involves an attempt to steal a consignment of diamonds which the British Government is sending to the Middle East to pay for an oil concession. Tarrant learns of the planned robbery and, realising that he needs a special operative with a particular knowledge of the area, sends for Modesty. After she has saved Willie from being hanged, the two of them set out together to thwart the theft.

This debut novel established the basic format for the later books: a criminal scheme which directly or indirectly involves someone with whom Willie and Modesty are associated, and which is masterminded by an eccentric head villain who is ably abetted by lieutenants with formidable combat skills.

In this instance, the mastermind is Gabriel, whom O'Donnell had first introduced in the third 'Modesty Blaise' strip, 'The Gabriel Set-Up'. Gabriel's right-hand man is the sinister McWhirter, who is assisted by ex-Network chief, Paco, and the sadistic karate killer, Mrs. Fothergill.

O'Donnell also took the opportunity in this book to further establish the principal characters. Modesty is presented as extremely strong-willed and occasionally ruthless, but with a softer, more feminine side. Her skills include being an expert shot with a Colt .32 revolver and master — or rather, mistress — of a number of martial arts, making her the equal of any man in a fight.

The first novel was a great success, and a second, *Sabre-Tooth*, appeared the following year. This involves the planned invasion of Kuwait by the villain, Kurz. Having assembled an army of mercenaries in Afghanistan, he begins looking around for officers to train the men. Modesty and Willie are on a list of names supplied by Mike Delgado, a former lover of Modesty's, and so Karz



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PETER O'DONNELL

# Pieces of MODESTY



*Pieces of Modesty*, O'Donnell's only collection of short stories, was published by Pan Books in 1972.

arranges for their ward, Lucille, to be kidnapped to ensure their co-operation. His main sidekicks are Siamese twins, joined at the shoulder at birth but surgically separated in adolescence, who move as one with perfect co-ordination and make a highly effective killing machine.

Sensibly, the Souvenir Press commissioned Jim Holdaway to provide a head-and-shoulders illustration of Modesty for the dustjacket. Like its predecessor, the paperback sported a photographic cover, featuring the first of a succession of lithe and sultry dark-haired models dressed in black and clasp- ing a deadly weapon of some sort.

The follow-up, *I, Lucifer* (1967), is based on a theme explored in the fifth newspaper strip, 'The Mind of Mrs. Drake': the paranormal. The villain this time is the evil puppeteer, Seff,

who, with the assistance of a psychotic who believes he is the Devil incarnate, sets out to blackmail several wealthy and influential people. Unfortunately for him, one of them — the head of the French Secret Service, René Vaubois — happens to be a friend of Modesty.

Jim Holdaway once again did the honours for the first edition dustjacket, his illustration showing a crystal ball, held in an open hand, in which Modesty's figure is reflected. The paperback cover features the obligatory machine-gun-toting model in a black catsuit and leather boots.

In the summer of 1968, a strike by newspaper blockmakers suspended publication of the *Evening Standard* for six weeks, part-way through a strip entitled 'The Galley Slaves'. However, a Scottish newspaper owned by Beaverbrook was unaffected by the strike and wanted to continue with the strip. As this would have meant that it would be weeks, or

*Last Day in Limbo* (1976) is widely considered to be the very best of the 'Modesty Blaise' novels.





even months, ahead of the English papers when the strike was resolved, O'Donnell and Holdaway had to come up with a shorter-than-usual 'filler' entitled 'The Killing Ground'. This didn't appear outside Scotland until fifteen years later, when it was included in *Mister Sun* (1985), one of several 'graphic novel' reprints from Titan.

Two years after *I, Lucifer*, the theme of extra-sensory perception crops up again in the fourth 'Modesty Blaise' novel, *A Taste of Death* (1969). In pursuit of buried treasure, Gabriel turns a Saharan archaeological dig into a slave camp brutally run by master swordmaster, Major Wenczel, and Simon Delicata, an old adversary of Willie's. However, Gabriel also requires the help of the blind psychic, Dinah Pilgrim, to help him find the precise location of the treasure. An initial attempt to kidnap her in Panama is foiled by Willie, but she is then successfully abducted from Modesty's cottage in Wiltshire.

Gabriel has little chance to regret once again crossing swords with Modesty and Willie. While writing this book, O'Donnell had a change of mind about recurring villains and, after appearing in two newspaper strips and the same number of novels, Gabriel was unceremoniously 'killed off', meeting his demise at the hands of Delicata.

### UNCOMPLETED

Holdaway's dustjacket illustration superimposes a sword and a half-face portrait of Modesty against a dark background. Sadly, it was to be his last, as he died quite suddenly in 1970 leaving the strip, 'The War-Lords of Phoenix', uncompleted.

As a replacement, O'Donnell finally settled on Enrique Badia Romero, a Spaniard who was a fine illustrator of the female form. Despite the fact that the latter's English was poor, which meant that he and O'Donnell had to work through an interpreter, the two men quickly forged an excellent rapport and the strip continued successfully.

The next novel, *The Impossible Virgin* (1971), concerns the attempts of the sadistic Brunel to find a large gold deposit, the whereabouts of which he believes is known by Dr. Giles Pennyfeather, whom Modesty has befriended



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The second of Star's ill-fated paperbacks containing reprints of some of the early newspaper strips.

when she used his jungle landing strip to repair her plane. Modesty falls into Brunel's hands and is subjected to psychological torture, before being gang-raped by the villain's men.

The following year saw the appearance of O'Donnell's only collection of 'Modesty Blaise' short stories, *Pieces of Modesty*. This was published as a paperback original by Pan, and has never been issued in hardback.

Around this time, ex-Avengers girl, Diana Rigg, backed by her husband, Archie Stirling, approached O'Donnell with the idea of producing a series of made-for-TV 'Modesty Blaise' movies, with her playing the lead. O'Donnell thought her a fine actress and was at first delighted with the idea, but he was less enthusiastic about Rigg's choice of Adam Faith to play Willie, and the negotiations finally came to nothing.

The sixth 'Modesty Blaise' novel, *The Silver Mistress* (1973), rather broke away from the established format, being a straightforward tale of kidnap and rescue. This time Tarrant himself is the victim, held hostage by Colonel Jim Straik, who is after confidential information about a number of leading politicians. One of the highlights of the book is Modesty's fight with Sexton, reputed to be the world's greatest martial arts expert. Modesty also has to make a long underground swim and covers herself in phosphorescent grease to protect against the cold, so becoming the 'silver mistress' of the title.

After a gap of three years, there appeared the watershed novel, *Last Day in Limbo*. This shows a clear step forward in O'Donnell's skills as a storyteller, keeping the usual rescue-mission formula but combining it with an imaginative plot to produce what is probably the finest 'Modesty Blaise' novel.

## ABDUCTED

Self-made South American multi-millionaire Ramon Paxero creates a slave plantation in the jungle — known rather grimly as 'Limbo' — to gratify his disturbed Aunt Benita. The slaves are selected from the society pages of newspapers, and abducted in such a way that it appears that they have been killed and their bodies lost.

Modesty becomes aware of this evil scheme when she foils the attempted kidnapping of her friend, John Dall, and comes to suspect that it is linked to the disappearance of Danny Chavasse, a colleague from the Network. After ascertaining the location of the plantation, Willie mounts an overland rescue attempt through the jungle, while Modesty allows herself to be taken by Paxero's men with the intention of organising an escape from the inside.

Mike Codd took over as the dustjacket artist for this and all the subsequent novels. The cover of the paperback edition depicted the torso of a model in a leather bodice, and similar 'anonymous' photographs were used for the next three Pan reissues.

The follow-up novel, *Dragon's Claw* (1978), is also a fine work. The title refers to an island

in the Tasman Sea where Sam Solom, another self-made millionaire, keeps his superb collection of stolen art treasures. In order to force Modesty and Willie to steal a valuable jade treasure for him, he gets his brutal underling, Beauregard Browne, to kidnap another of their unfortunate friends. In the course of his rescue, the two of them come up against ace sharpshooter, Uriah Crisp, and nymphomaniac Clarissa, who kills with a bicycle spoke concealed in a rolled-up newspaper.

## DESIGNS

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, all the books were reissued many times in paperback, initially retaining their original cover designs. However, later reprints were given photographic covers and then, in the 1980s, quasi-surrealist illustrations of Modesty by Steven Schaffer, reproduced against a white background.

Around the same time, W. H. Allen published, under their Star imprint, a couple of paperbacks — *In The Beginning* and *The Black Pearl and The Vikings* (both 1978) — reprinting several of the early *Evening Standard* strips. Unfortunately, the panels were often cut or enlarged to fit the format, with the result that the books quickly found their way into the remainder bins.

Back at the *Standard*, meanwhile, John M. Burns briefly took over from Romero as artist, only to be replaced himself several months later by Pat Wright. He in turn only lasted a year before Neville Colvin assumed the pencilling chores. He retired in early 1986, whereupon Romero resumed drawing the strip with the story, 'Butch Cassidy Rides



The first edition dustjacket for the last of the 'Modesty Blaise' novels, *Dead Man's Handle* (1985).

Again'. He is still in the artist's chair, making him Modesty Blaise's longest-serving illustrator.

The 1980s found Modesty mellowing somewhat, and no longer actually killing adversaries unless it was absolutely necessary. O'Donnell was also taking greater care to avoid including items that would date his stories, and began to travel the world to research locations for his books.

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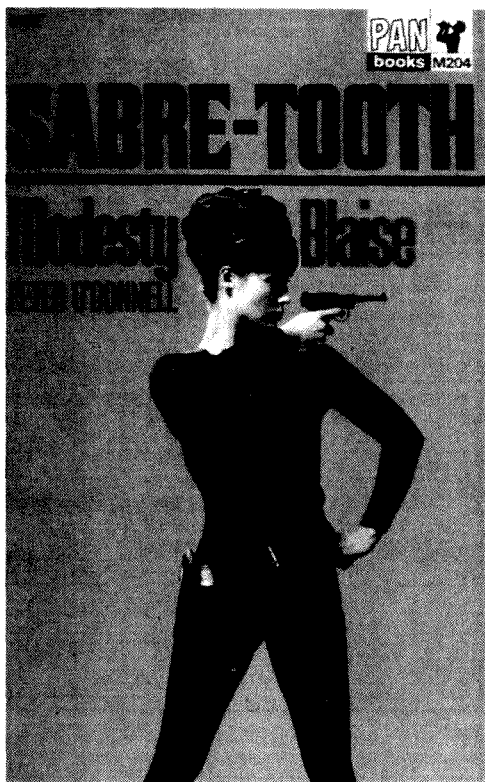
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A typical Pan cover from the Sixties, featuring the obligatory gun-toting model dressed all in black.

As with *The Silver Mistress*, a rescue mission forms the basis of *The Xanadu Talisman* (1981). Fulfilling a vow she'd made to a man murdered in her Tangiers villa, Modesty sets out to free his wife from the harem of Prince Mohajani Azhari in Xanadu, an isolated palace high in the Atlas Mountains.

The penultimate novel, *The Night of Morningstar* (1982), opens with a lengthy flashback to the days of the Network, describing how Modesty first meets a CIA agent whose death in the 'present' places her at odds with the Watchmen, an organisation committed to bringing about the downfall of the developed nations. 'Operation Morningstar' is their grand scheme to kill all the western leaders gathered at a summit meeting on a Mediterranean island, laying the blame on Modesty and Willie.

The early 1980s also saw fresh attempts to bring Modesty to the television screens, this time in the United States. O'Donnell was sceptical, but the company concerned, Paramount, sent producer, Barney Rosenzweig, over to persuade him. O'Donnell found him amiable and liked his approach, and so gave the go-ahead for a sixty-minute pilot.

He later came to regret this decision as Rosenzweig began to have problems with the studio, which led to a lot of good ideas going unrealised. Neither he nor O'Donnell was satisfied with the end-product, although the audience response to the pilot and its star, Ann Turkel, was not unfavourable. Rosenzweig resumed work on the very successful *Cagney and Lacey* shortly afterwards, and Paramount subsequently dropped plans for a 'Modesty Blaise' series.

## DÉBÂCLE

Several years later, the American ABC network also bought an option to produce a ninety-minute pilot for a projected series. O'Donnell was sent a script but, after seeing three draughts, he felt that the whole thing was yet another example of 'writing by committee' and, fearing a repetition of the feature film débâcle, refused to extend their option any further.

Nevertheless, it wasn't long before there were more positive developments, with the acquisition by Titan Books of the rights to some of the early newspaper strips from the 1960s. In January 1985, they published *The Gabriel Set-Up*, a large softcover album which brought together the first three adventures plus 'In the Beginning'. The book also featured an introduction by O'Donnell and a new cover illustration by John M. Burns. To the delight of collectors everywhere, this proved to be a success, prompting the appearance of no less than seven follow-ups, the first of which, *Mister Sun* (1985), included the classic strips, 'The Mind of Mrs. Drake' and 'The Killing Ground'.

Just after the launch of the Titan series, O'Donnell finished work on the final 'Modesty Blaise' novel, which was published in hardback later that year. *Dead Man's Handle* (1985), as this book was called,

pitted our heroine against Dr. Thaddeus Pilgrim and his assistants, Sybil Pray and Kazim (both skilled in Roman gladiatorial combat), who are together planning an insurance scam involving the sinking of an oil tanker.

Mike Codd's dustjacket illustrations shows a tunic-wearing Modesty posing aggressively with a sword and shield. The Pan paperback, breaking with tradition, features a very similar piece of artwork by Trevor Scobie, although in this case Modesty's tunic is decidedly see-through! The cover is dominated by the book's title and the name of its heroine, which are embossed in blue and white respectively. This novel was not reprinted as many times as its predecessors, and hardback copies are scarce today.

To commemorate the character's thirtieth anniversary, American publishing giants, DC Comics, planned to issue a prestige-format, limited edition 'Modesty Blaise' comic book in May 1993. However, due to unforeseen problems, this did not materialise, and the company now has plans to publish a 144-page special some time this year.

Having been at the typewriter for well over fifty years, Peter O'Donnell has decided to retire from writing novels so that he can take life a little easier. Having said that, he continues to write the newspaper strip — which is currently syndicated to 52 publications in fifteen countries — and is planning another volume of short stories. We would like to thank him, not only for his co-operation in preparing this article, but also more importantly for providing its inspiration.

## PETER O'DONNELL UK BIBLIOGRAPHY

A guide to current values of first editions in Very Good to Fine condition with dustjackets.

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# CLASSIC HUMORIST STEPHEN LEACOCK

AUTHOR OF 'LITERARY LAPSES' AND 'NONSENSE NOVELS'

BY F.H. WINSTANLEY

**Y**ou know, of course, that well-known fictional character, the clown, whose loud laughter and grotesque antics belie his breaking heart. You may not, however, be so familiar with the scholarly philosopher — a string of letters after his name, and many recondite tomes to his credit — whose fame outside the confines of his own narrow, academic circles rests rather on works whose alliterative titles — *Nonsense Novels*, *Frenzied Fiction*, *Further Foolishness* — indicate a rather more lighthearted approach to life than his academic reputation might suggest. This man was Stephen Leacock.

Leacock was born in England in 1869, but at the age of six was taken to Ontario in Canada by his family. After studying at the University of Toronto, he taught for several years, before obtaining a Ph.D. at Chicago. In 1903, he joined the staff of McGill University, Montreal, and for the greater part of his adult life was Professor of Political Economy at that august institution.

## FARCICAL

However, his delight — and ours too if we care to read his books — was to devise and record the sort of farcical situations and zany characters that the Marx Brothers would have been only too happy to portray. In fact, many of his sketches and stories could well have been adapted as scripts for Marx Brothers films, something he realised himself later in life when he attempted to interest Hollywood moguls in his work. Short-sightedly, they failed to realise his potential as a scriptwriter and ignored his short-lived attempts to break

into the film world. Needless to say, this was as much their loss as ours.

Consider this anecdote, however, before bowing to their benighted verdict. As a young man, Leacock was inordinately proud of his newly acquired Ph.D. On his way to Europe, having signed the ship's passenger list as Dr. Leacock, he was just settling into his cabin



Stephen Leacock, photographed in 1910 © Hulton

when the steward knocked and asked, "Dr. Leacock? The Captain's compliments, Doctor, and will you please come and look at the second stewardess's knee?" Leacock was off like a shot. "But it was no use. Another fellow got there ahead of me. He was a Doctor of Divinity!" If that isn't worthy of Groucho, then I don't know what is!

Another 'Grouchism' also concerned his Ph.D. "The meaning of this degree is that the recipient is examined for the last time in his life and is pronounced completely full. After this no new ideas can be imparted to him!"

## FRESH

Sadly, Leacock's books are largely forgotten today, although at his best his humour is still as fresh as when it was first written and would stand comparison with many of the supposedly 'funny' TV sitcoms that so convulse live audiences — and leave the rest of us cold. At a recent book fair, two dealers I approached admitted to never having heard of Leacock — neither had copies of any of his books nor, surprisingly, could I find any on sale anywhere else at the fair.

On the other hand, visiting my local secondhand bookshop a few days later I found three of Leacock's works: a first edition of *The Hohenzollerns in America*; *College Days*, complete with dustjacket; and a second impression of *My Discovery of England*, dated 1922, the year of the first edition. The first two books cost me 50p each, the third, 10p! I am

not claiming that prices are as low as this everywhere, but it does suggest that, while Leacock is so little regarded here at present, this is a prime time for starting a collection of his works.

Humour is, as all collectors know, subject to fads and fashions. I am quite sure that Leacock's genius (which, I should add, has never been short of admirers in his adopted country) will eventually be recognised and reassessed here, so that those who begin collecting his works now will be making a sound investment for the future.

Leacock's popularity was at its height in this country in the Twenties and Thirties when, as a humorous writer, he was ranked second only to P. G. Wodehouse, and in some quarters thought to be superior to the Master. Their style, however, was vastly different in character, if not in quality.

Wodehouse was a novelist, his books reflecting the enormous amount of preliminary planning that went into them. Leacock was quite incapable of such detailed plotting and sustained construction/characterisation. Although he prided himself on his acute observation of the quirks and foibles of his neighbours and could point to *The Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, a collection depicting the life and character of a typical small Canadian community, as evidence of this, in truth his gifts were more suited to the literary equivalent of the camera snapshot than the continuous panorama of a movie.

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"JOS. SMITH, PROP.," AND THEN STOOD UNDERNEATH IN THE SUNSHINE  
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## SUNSHINE SKETCHES OF A LITTLE TOWN BY STEPHEN LEACOCK

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY CYRUS CUNEO

LONDON: JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD  
NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY. MCMXII  
TORONTO: BELL AND COCKBURN.

Leacock lampooned his home town of Orillia in this delightful collection of 'sunshine sketches' from 1912.

In fact, his style of writing was established during his early days as a freelance contributor to the numerous papers and magazines that flourished just before and after the turn of the century, providing an enormous and lucrative market for the talented author. We must not forget that Wodehouse himself started off in precisely the same way on this side of the Atlantic, where such opportunities were just as plentiful.

Earning a 'fast buck' by writing short pieces for these papers was, for Leacock, an easy way of supplementing his income which, in his early years, was never sufficient to meet all his needs and those of his family.

His first book wasn't in the least funny, although by the time it was published he had been writing and publishing his humorous sketches for some years. The book was, in fact, the result of three years' study and

research undertaken primarily because university professors were expected, besides teaching the young, to publish books to justify their elevated, academic standing.

In Leacock's case, this justification was entitled *The Elements of Political Science*, a text book that was destined to be for many years the standard work on the subject and to outstrip in sales all his humorous works, popular though they were. It was reissued in 1910 and revised in 1921, and was eventually translated into eighteen languages. There must still be copies, unread for years, on many a dusty shelf throughout the world, but Leacock's *Elements* has long been outdated and is of little value even to collectors, except as a curiosity.

Although the book did much for his reputation as a college professor, it was not until three years later that he published a work



which extended his fame outside the confines of McGill University.

Once again, it was born out of a need for quick money. His parents, both from well-to-do Isle of Wight families, had made two previous attempts to carve out a living in hostile, 'back-of-beyond' outposts before settling in Canada. The first, financed by Leacock's paternal grandfather, took them to a farm in Maritzbury, South Africa, from which they were driven by locusts. His father, Peter, then tried to settle in Kansas, only to be once again routed by pests — this time, oversized grasshoppers!

The Canadian venture might well have ended the same way except that Leacock's mother, Agnes, was made of sterner stuff. His father, however, could take no more and left his wife and children to fend for themselves — which, according to Leacock's later reminiscences, they did very well.

## REPUTATION

A combination of circumstances prompted him to publish a collection of his humorous pieces, not least his marriage and his subsequent purchase of what he called a "property" in Orillia, close to Lake Couchiching, Ontario. Casting around for some way to augment his income, he decided to offer the contents of his "literary scrapbook" to a publisher, much against the advice of a friend who warned him that such a book would damage his reputation in academic circles. He offered the project to Archibald Constable, who had handled the *Elements of Political Science*, but they took the same view as his friend, replying that "a humorous work" would be "too uncertain".

Undeterred, Leacock decided to publish the book himself and, succumbing to a lifelong love of alliteration, called it *Literary Lapses*. Despite the fact that it was only available in and around Montreal, it nevertheless sold 3,000 copies. As luck would have it — and luck is the one essential that a self-publishing author needs and seldom gets — John Lane of the Bodley Head was visiting Canada at the time. He bought a copy of the book to relieve the tedium of the voyage home and was so impressed with it that on his arrival in London he immediately telegraphed Leacock

suggesting an British edition. Leacock responded with a laconic, "Accepted with thanks!"

The success of the book in England was immediate. Leacock was hailed as the Canadian Mark Twain and also — since from this side of the Atlantic, 'America' means the whole continent — "the Master of American Humour". Among the best of the pieces reprinted in *Literary Lapses* were 'My Financial Career', which dealt with a young man's humiliating (but hilarious) first encounter with banking (the Canadian National Film Board made a cartoon film of this story in the Sixties); and 'Boarding House Geometry', where we learn the immortal axioms that: "A Landlady is a parallelogram — that is, an oblong angular figure, which cannot be described but which is equal to anything", and: "A single room is that which has no parts and no magnitude." No need to be a student of geometry to see the humour in that!

Also included was an essay entitled 'The Saga of A, B, and C'. These are the celebrated characters we all learned about at primary

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school who do 'a certain piece of work' — A doing as much in an hour as B in two, and C in four — and we are asked to discover how long they respectively take to complete it. In Leacock's piece, each one has a personality of his own — A, hot-headed and strong-willed; B, quiet and easy going, afraid of A but kind and gentle with C, the weakling who is completely in A's power having lost all his money to him in bets — and we are told their entire life stories.

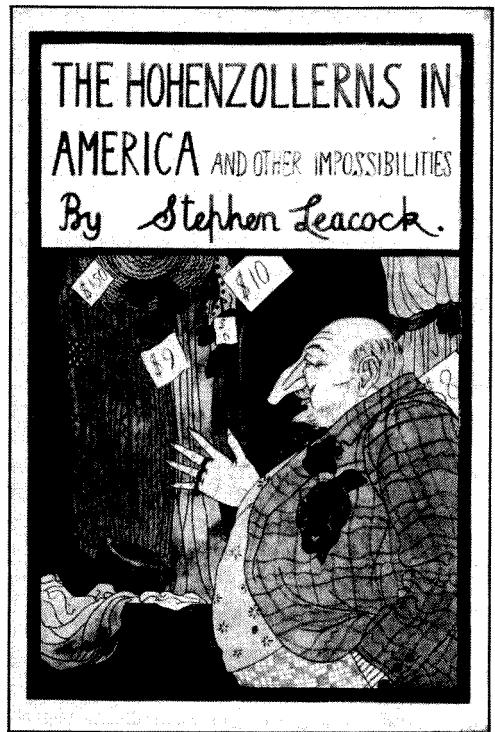
And so, at the age of forty, Leacock — hitherto merely a learned and respected academic — suddenly found himself a literary lion. He had previously let it be known that his chief desire was to get away from the madding crowd and bury himself in the country, hence his interest in the weekend property at Orillia. Now, however, two other courses opened up to him: he could continue his career at the university, where he was a figure of growing importance; or he could pursue the literary life, attempting to become the clown prince of Canadian humour. In fact, rather than choose one of the three, he decided to combine them all.

## EXTROVERT

We are assured by those students who remembered Leacock later in life that he kept his two careers separate although, since he somehow acquired the nickname 'Leaky Steamcock', this is hard to believe. Harder still when you consider his extrovert nature and the need to develop a style of lecturing that would hold the attention of his young charges.

In addition, there was a streak of the actor in him which, while never let loose on the public stage, enabled him to play up to selected audiences — his students, family friends, relations and others who held him in some esteem. This, in fact, is the way his talent developed. As one of his former students put it: "He was a born actor and could hold the class spellbound. No-one ever skipped one of his lectures."

The success of Leacock's first collection of humorous essays prompted him to put together a second, made up of new sketches which had recently appeared in a Toronto



*The Hohenzollerns in America* (1919) follows the misadventures of the German Kaiser and his family after they have been exiled from Europe by the Allies.

weekly. This was originally to have been called *Novels in Nutshells*, but was eventually published under the title *Nonsense Novels* in 1911. This book contains one immortal phrase which is still widely quoted today, when a lovelorn swain, spurned by his lady-love: "flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions"! The phrase would probably have gained wide renown merely on its own merits, but when Theodore Roosevelt, himself a far from solemn character, cited it in one of his speeches, the resulting publicity ensured that it became part of English folklore.

The book was received in this country as ecstatically as its predecessor had been. The *Daily Express*, as befitted the more 'work-a-day' side of the press, could express its rapture only in single words of an ascending number of syllables — "a scream, witty, ingenious, irresistible!". The *Pall Mall Gazette*

and the *World* were more restrained in their enthusiasm for what was, after all, only a book of sketches from the 'New World', the former praising its "healthy humour" and comparing Leacock to Lewis Carroll, the latter admiring "the subtlety of wit which, while it does not move to irrepressible laughter, tickles the senses not unpleasantly". This is somewhat typical of the sort of condescension our Commonwealth cousins had to put up with in those days!

Both papers later revised their opinions of Leacock, the *Gazette*, (again, not entirely free of condescension) calling his humour "a credit to Canada and with a depth and polish rare in the literature of a young nation"; and the *World* commenting that: "Those readers who fail to find pleasure in this new volume of essays will be difficult to please. Here are discourses in the author's happiest vein." That these remarks were not undeserved is evidenced by the fact that *Nonsense Novels* went into forty editions over the next three decades.

## AFFECTIONATE

But if there is one book above all his others for which Leacock is revered in his adopted country it is *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). Using the small community of Orillia — where he had his weekend and summer retreat — as his model (although 'Mariposa', the name of his fictional equivalent, is taken from a nearby hamlet), he painted a satirical but affectionate portrait of what he described as a "typical small Canadian town" and the men and women who peopled it.

These sketches were originally written for the *Montreal Star*, and many Orillians were somewhat mortified to find themselves portrayed in print for the edification of their fellow citizens. There could be no doubt about which town he was writing about, as Leacock used the actual names of Orillia's saloon-keeper, barber, local politicians, loafers, idlers, and other townspeople! That he escaped several actions for libel can only be attributed to the gentleness of his satire.

However, when the sketches came to be issued in book form, the publisher insisted that the names were changed, which means that you have to consult the original articles

in the *Montreal Star* to discover the true identities of Mr. Mullins, Manager of the Exchange Bank; Mr Golgotha Gingham the undertaker; Judge Pepperleigh; or Billy, the desk clerk at Smith's Hotel.

It was typical of Leacock that, on the outbreak of the Great War, he should throw himself wholeheartedly into the defence of the British Empire. Too old at 45 to don an army uniform, he embarked upon a programme of public speaking and lectures, in the process raising substantial sums for the war effort. This was in addition to his university work and writing — between 1914 to 1919, he published no less than seven new books, five of them humorous works.

The espionage-mania current at this time gave rise to one of his funniest sketches, 'My Revelations as a Spy', included in his 1918 collection, *Frenzied Fiction*. The agent in question is trying to book into a New York hotel: "The clerk informed me that he had no room vacant . . . whether or not he suspected that I was a spy I cannot say. I was muffled up in a long overcoat with the collar reaching well

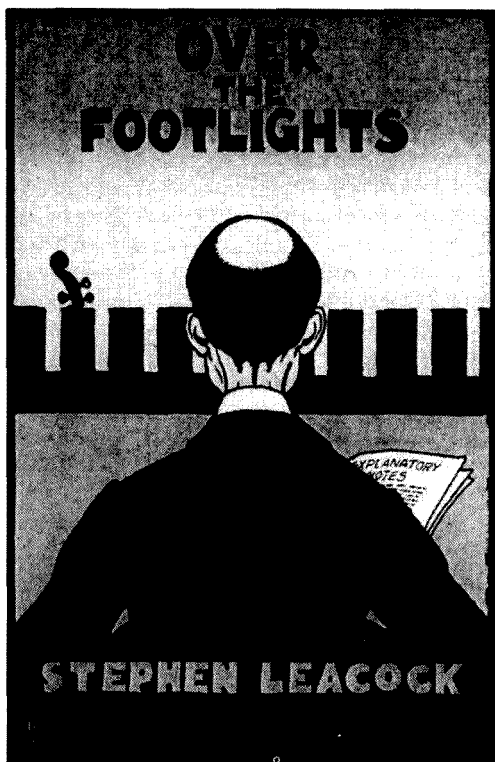
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The British editions of Leacock's humorous works almost all feature superb pictorial dustjackets like this one. The jackets more than double the value of a book.

above my ears while the black beard and moustache that I had slipped on concealed my face. 'Let me speak to the manager,' I said. When he came I beckoned him aside and taking his ear in my hand I breathed two words into it. 'Good heavens!' he gasped while his face turned as pale as ashes. 'Is it enough?' I asked. 'Can I have a room or must I breathe again?' 'No, no,' said the manager, still trembling. Then, turning to the clerk: 'Give this gentleman a room,' he said, 'and give him a bath.' What these two words are that will get a room in New York at once I must not divulge. Suffice it to say that if these two had failed I know a couple of others still better."

Much of what Leacock felt about the war and the Germans' part in it can be ascertained from a book he published in 1919, *The Hohenzollerns in America*. This, written at a time when there was a large and vociferous move-

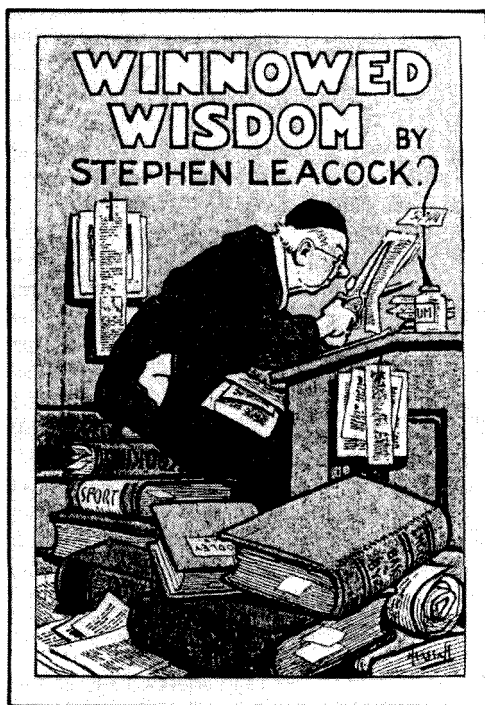
ment to 'Hang the Kaiser', portrays the German emperor and his family as a party of refugees fleeing Europe to settle in America. It takes in the form of a diary written by the Kaiser's niece, and Leacock took great delight in depicting the Hohenzollerns as a poor immigrant family having to carry their own luggage wherever they go. Although not a runaway success, the book was well received in Britain, the *Daily Chronicle* applauding its "rollicking good humour".

This made all the more inexplicable his publisher's rejection of his next book, *Winsome Winnie* (1921), another superb collection of dotty and cheerful pieces. In the end Leacock had to agree to a reduced royalty and he, at least, was not surprised when the book eventually went through eight editions. The *Evening Standard* commented that it was "as full of gems as *Literary Lapses* and *Nonsense Novels*", and that Leacock was "one of the last great humorists".

## ENGLAND

The Twenties was a decade of great affluence for Leacock. A tour of the U.K. — in the course of which he met many famous writers, including H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and J. M. Barrie — inspired one of his funniest books, *My Discovery of England*. Among the subjects he wrote about was the gloominess of the capital: "The distinction between day and night during the London winter is still quite obvious to anyone of an observant mind," he noted. "It is indicated by various signs such as the striking of clocks, the tolling of bells, the closing of saloons and the raising of taxi rates. It is much less easy to distinguish the technical approach of night in other cities of England . . . in such places night may be said to be perpetual."

He also mentions a commission he received from a New York editor to mingle with London's intellectual élite. "He suggested that I send him back some of this brilliance [and so] I held conversations with these people and I gave him in all truthfulness the result. Sir James Barrie said, 'This is really very exceptional weather for this time of year.' Cyril Maude said, 'And so a Martini cocktail is merely gin and vermouth.' Ian Hay said,



John Hassall drew the dustjacket illustration for *Winnowed Wisdom*, published by John Lane in 1926.

'You'll find the Underground ever so handy once you understand it.' I have a lot more of these repartees that I could insert here if it was necessary. But somehow I feel it is not."

*My Discovery of England* was given only a lukewarm reception by Leacock's publisher. It was amusing, he thought, but would hardly set the world on fire or add much to the company's profits. Once again, however, Leacock proved them wrong, and the book, which still makes good reading today, ran to several editions.

The high point of his visit to England was his stay at Oxford where he met several former McGill graduates, was fêted and lionised by the academic fraternity, and addressed the Union. He felt that Oxford was his spiritual home and, on his return to McGill, tried to introduce some of the practices and traditions he had found there.

A minor disappointment was a visit to his birthplace, Swanmore in Hampshire. Not

having seen the village for close on fifty years, and buoyed up by vague memories of a childhood spent in the continuous golden haze of summer, he found the reality something of a letdown. He could only comment, "It's better not to go back. Leave your memory as it is. No reality will ever equal it." Wiser men have said as much.

In the mid-Twenties, Leacock was devastated by the sudden death of his wife, but found solace in his work. A play adapted from his sketch, 'Behind the Beyond', enjoyed an unexpected success in London; he wrote a series of entries on Canada for *Encyclopedia Britannica* (even though he had claimed in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* that, "I would rather have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole of [that august publication]"); adapted some of his pieces for the radio, and even flirted briefly with politics.

Unfortunately, his radio debut was disastrous. It had been thought that his magnetism as a public speaker would transfer easily from the lecture hall to the studio but, in the event, his delivery proved to be too undisciplined for the microphone (apart from anything else, he laughed while telling jokes) and the listeners switched channels in hurried thousands. It did not take Leacock long to realise that this new medium — which he already detested because it kept people from reading and outdoor pursuits — was not for him, and after only five shows he asked to be relieved of his contract.

Leacock's political career never really got started, although there is no doubt that he was considered as a serious contender by more than one party leader. Conservative — almost

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# THE BODLEY HEAD LEACOCK

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*The Bodley Head Leacock, edited by J. B. Priestley, is one of many anthologies of the great man's work.*

reactionary — in his views, Leacock was a 'natural' for the Canadian Tory party and electioneered for them at every opportunity. There have been rumours that he was offered a cabinet post by Prime Minister Richard B. Bennett in the Twenties, although this has never been confirmed. It is known, however, that Bennett consulted Leacock about monetary policies, and that the latter was only too happy to offer his advice.

The passage of time inevitably brought changes, not all for the better. A new principal was appointed by the Board of Governors at McGill, and he decreed that — unlike politicians — professors had outlived their useful working lives at 65 and would, in future, be forcibly retired at that age. Leacock took this decision with extremely ill grace, and never

lost an opportunity to deride the Governors, and particularly the Principal responsible for it.

In the last ten years of his life, he produced no less than 25 books — over two a year — eight of which (including one called *Too Much College*) were lighthearted works. He did not lack offers of further employment, including one from England. His reasons for refusing the latter were summed up in an article he wrote shortly after his retirement: "We are sitting pretty here in Canada," he commented. "East and West are two oceans away . . . The noise and tumult of Europe we scarcely hear; not for us the anger of the Balkans, the weeping of Vienna and the tumults of Berlin. Our lot lies elsewhere." Despite these sentiments, Leacock was as ready in 1939 as in 1914 to rush to the defence of his beloved 'Empire', and in 1940 even published a book with the anachronistic title, *Our British Empire*.

## ACHIEVEMENT

Leacock died on 28th March 1944 at the age of 75, having completed only four chapters of an autobiography entitled *The Boy I Left Behind Me*, a somewhat rambling and repetitive account of his early years. It was not until the 1960s that his achievement was properly recognised in his adopted country. In that decade, the authorities at McGill University dedicated a Leacock Room to his memory, and the Canadian Government converted his house at Orillia into a 'national historic site', renaming it 'The Stephen Leacock Memorial Home'.

The former houses his desk, many original manuscripts, first editions of his books and copies of periodicals containing his articles, while the Memorial Home holds many of Leacock's private papers and items of memorabilia. In recognition of the reverence that his many British admirers have for him, a plaque has been affixed to the cottage in Swanmore, Hampshire, where he was born.

Few of the books listed below will cost more than £5 without dustjackets. However, most of the humorous titles were issued in splendid, full-colour jackets by John Lane, and you can expect to pay double-figure sums for

Fine copies that have these. Leacock's more serious works are now outdated and almost forgotten, even in Canada, and they will only be of interest to a completist or specialist.

Whether or not Leacock's reputation will ever regain the dizzy heights it enjoyed in the Twenties and Thirties is debatable. However, there's no doubt that his works will always be read and collected, if only for their perceptiveness about human behaviour — and

Leacock was himself very human in his failings and eccentricities — and their lively atmosphere and, above all, warmth. For, as Leacock himself says in *How to Write*: "Humour, it cannot too often be said, must be kind."

*My thanks to Ulysses Books of Museum Street (071-831-1600) for the loan of books used to illustrate this feature.*

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# THE POETRY OF T.S. ELIOT

BY CRISPIN JACKSON

**T**owards the end of his life, T. S. Eliot wrote in a letter to Ezra Pound that, of all his works, he considered only 'The Waste Land' and the last three of the *Four Quartets* to have been "worth writing". Although most critics would argue that his list of major works does not end there, posterity has tended to confirm his judgement that these two long poems make up the twin peaks of his poetry, representing the best of his early and late work.

I wonder, though, how true this is? It is interesting that in 1938, whilst on a lecture tour of the United States, Eliot twice stated that he had "almost lost contact with the young man who had written the earlier poetry", and his biographer, Peter Ackroyd, adds rather grimly that "it might be more accurate to say that he had escaped from him". There's no doubt that after the heady triumphs of his youth, Eliot succeeded in developing as a poet, but were these changes for the better? I believe not.

## PRECOCIOUS

Eliot's reputation is now so well established that it is easy to forget just what a precocious genius he was. Pound wrote of him to Harriet Monroe, Eliot's first publisher, that he had "modernized himself *on his own*", and that was indeed the case. His education at Milton Academy, Boston, and Harvard University was rigorous and wide-ranging, but it was as conventional as his worthy St. Louis forebears. The young Tom grew up with — and loved — the works of Kipling, Poe and Edward Fitzgerald, and yet already in 1910, when he was barely past his 21st birthday, he



Eliot in his first year at Harvard

© Mary Evans

was writing the first of his great poems, 'Portrait of a Lady' and 'Preludes' (originally entitled, respectively, 'Caprices in North Cambridge' and 'Preludes in Roxbury').

In between, he had discovered the English poets of the 1890s — Dowson, Symons, John Davidson (author of 'Thirty Bob a Week'), James 'B.V.' Thomson ('The City of Dreadful Night') — and the 'modern' French masters, notably Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue (the latter through Arthur Symons' pioneering study, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*). These men introduced him to what Ackroyd calls "the poetry of urban romance", and yet none of them ever managed to evoke the "sawdust-trampled streets" of the modern city, and the despondency of those that dwell in them, as effectively as Eliot did.

Most of the works to be found in Eliot's first, revolutionary collection, *Prufrock and Other Poems* (1917) were written in 1910-11 whilst he was in Europe ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' was actually completed during a visit to Munich). Nevertheless, their unique landscape — with its "one-night cheap

hotels/And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells" — is unmistakably American, an amalgam of the St. Louis where he spent his childhood and the Boston of his youth. Eliot later claimed that a poet's imagery comes from the "whole of his sensitive life since early childhood" and represents "the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer", but it's possible to see in this meeting of a European sensibility and an American outlook — as it were, Old World (although modern) forms and New World materials — part of the reason for the extraordinary power and freshness of his early verse.

## INSPIRED

It's interesting that these poems should have been completed at a distance from the places that had inspired them, while Eliot was staying in Paris and Munich (which are barely mentioned in any of his verses). Equally significant is the fact that he produced precisely nothing of note during the subsequent three years (autumn 1911 to summer 1914), during which he studied philosophy

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and Eastern religion at Harvard. The clear implication is that, whatever his literary influences (and remember that Pound believed that these were relatively unimportant — that Eliot had literally “modernized himself”), the main inspiration for his work — at least, this brilliant early work — was the real, American world of his childhood and youth. It’s also clear that, like Joyce, he needed to be separated from this familiar world before he could write properly about it.

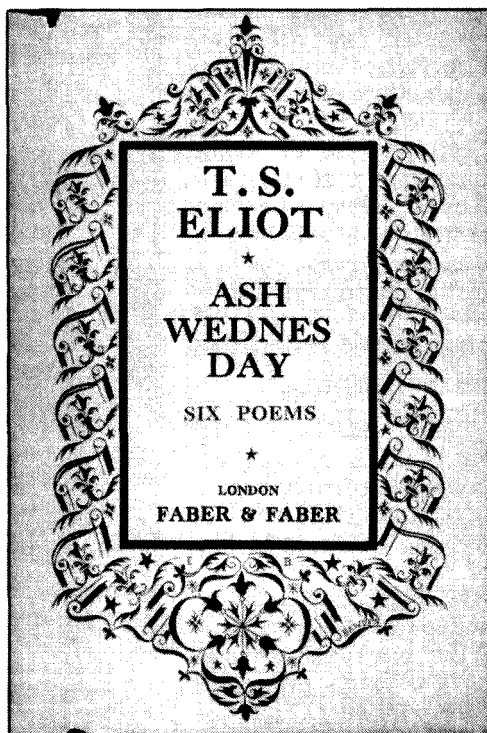
It was perhaps this awareness that prompted Eliot to sail to Britain in the summer of 1914 to continue his studies at Oxford. In September of that year he showed his poems to Ezra Pound, who’d been living in London for five years. Pound was bowled over: “[‘Prufrock’ is] the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American,” he wrote to Harriet Monroe, owner of the Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine. The poem duly appeared in the June 1915 issue of that publication, just beating ‘Preludes’ and ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’, which were published in the July 1915 issue of Wyndham Lewis’s shortlived journal, *Blast*. All three were included in Eliot’s first collection, *Prufrock and Other Poems*, a slim yellow pamphlet published by the Egoist Press in June 1917 in an edition of only 500 copies.

## VIRTUOSITY

“The poems of ‘Prufrock,’” Ackroyd writes in his 1984 biography of Eliot, “are examples of dramatic virtuosity, conceived in terms of monologue and dialogue, ‘scene’ and character.” In other words, they are more ‘impressionistic’ (dealing with the ‘real world’) than contemplative (considering ideas).

His next major collection, *Ara Vos Prec* (The Ovid Press, [1920]; published in the same year by Knopf under the title *Poems*), is more literary, but still displays the brilliant imagery that so distinguished its predecessor. Apart from ‘Gerontion’, the first and longest poem, the finest verses are all in the form of four-line quatrains, which Eliot had discovered in the works of another Frenchman, Theophile Gautier.

Eliot’s masterpiece, ‘The Waste Land’, was begun in London in 1919 and completed in Lausanne, in January 1922. Once again, Eliot



The six poems in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) are religious in tone, reflecting Eliot’s new-found Christian faith.

showed it first of all to Pound, dropping it off with him in Paris on his way back from Switzerland. “Complimenti, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies,” was the latter’s typically cryptic reply.

Despite his admiration for the work, however, he promptly subjected it to what he called a “Caesarian operation”, removing whole passages, including an opening ‘dramatic pastiche’ featuring a ‘man-about-town’. Although it is not true, as some people have suggested, that the success of the poem is as much due to Pound as to Eliot, it is the case that without the former it would not have been the polished work of art that it is: in Ackroyd’s words, he revealed “the underlying rhythm of the poem, the music of which Eliot was so distrustful”.

‘The Waste Land’ was first published in the October 1922 issue of Eliot’s own magazine, the *Criterion*, appearing the following month in an American publication, the *Dial*.

The first book edition was issued by the American firm, Horace and Liveright, a month later, in an edition of 1,000 copies (another 1,000 were printed almost immediately afterwards). Almost a year elapsed before it was published in hardcovers in this country by the Hogarth Press, their edition finally leaving the presses in September 1923.

## LONDON

'The Waste Land' is the last of Eliot's major poems to be imbued with a sense of place — of the world of men and women rather than of the mind — although now the place is London, and particularly its river ("The river sweats/Oil and tar/The barges drift/With the turning tide"). From this point on, his work became more abstract, more declamatory and rhetorical — and, in my opinion, much less powerful.

Of course, it's no bad thing for a poet to develop, but I wish that Eliot had developed in the opposite direction to the one he took: *towards*, and not away from, narrative verse, concentrating more on the Prufrocks and Gerontions of this world, and less on its bells and rose-leaves — more on evocation and less on symbolism. His next major poem, 'The Hollow Men' ("We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men"), with its "use of clear and simple images, of repeated statement and of an uncomplicated accentual metre much closer to speech than any of the poetry he had composed before" (Ackroyd), seems an empty work to me, and an ominous indication of things to come.

Of course, much of this was due to changes in his spiritual life. In 1923, he had met William Force Stead, an American poet who had recently been ordained into the Church of England. Although the latter's influence was not immediate — Eliot didn't start taking confir-



*Eliot's unhappy first marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood is the subject of a new film, starring Willem Dafoe as the poet, and Miranda Richardson as Vivien.*

mation classes until the beginning of 1927 — it was nevertheless decisive, and on 29th June 1927 Eliot was formally received (although in absolute secrecy) into the Anglican church. That year, he also took British nationality, making the final break with his American past which, I believe, inspired his greatest work.

His faith is reflected in all of his mature works, including his next two poetry titles, *Journey of the Magi* (Faber: 'Ariel' pamphlet, [1927]), a lovely poem in his 'old style' (what Ackroyd writes of it — that "the brilliant obliquities of the earlier work have gone . . . the lines no longer flash and gleam, they reach a conclusion" — is true of just about every one of his late pieces *except* this one); and the verse-sequence, *Ash-Wednesday* ("Because I do not hope to turn again/Because I do not hope/Because I do not hope to turn" etc.), published by Faber in 1930.

In 1924, Eliot had had a meeting with Arnold Bennett in the course of which he had announced his intention to divert his energies towards "dramatic writing" rather than 'pure poetry'. His first experiment in this direction,

a curious attempt at an 'Aristophanic Melodrama' entitled *Sweeney Agonistes*, was never completed (although two fragments from the play were published by Faber in 1932), but in the mid-Thirties — at the end of a five-year period in which he had produced only a handful of minor poems — he returned to the medium, writing two successful religious dramas, *The Rock* (premiered at Sadler's Wells in 1934; the choruses are included in his *Collected Poems*) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (first performed in Canterbury Cathedral in June 1935).

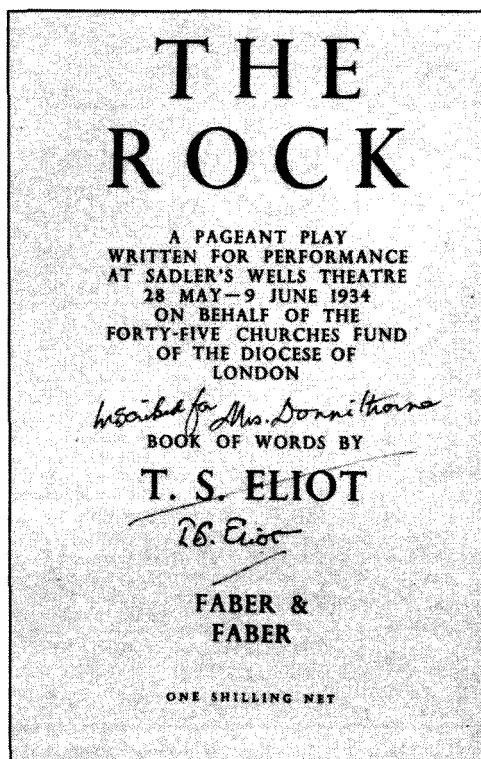
The success of the latter prompted Eliot to write four more verse plays: *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958). Recording their meeting in his *Journals*, Bennett had noted that Eliot "wanted to write a drama of modern life (furnished flat sort of people) in a rhythmic prose", and all of these works more or less conform to that formula. Although they are still occasionally performed, they seem curiously old-fashioned today, and rather lacking in 'focus'.

## WONDERFUL

Apart from the wonderful *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (first published in 1939, and reissued the following year with Nicolas Bentley's incomparable illustrations — Pound had dubbed Eliot 'Old Possum' because of his evasiveness and caution), the major work of Eliot's last years was his *Four Quartets*.

In his *Paris Review* interview, Eliot revealed that most of his long poems or verse sequences had begun as fragments, and only 'coalesced' after a long gestation: "That's one way in

**Next issue  
on sale  
20 May**



*Seven Eliot items — including this signed copy of **The Rock** — fetched £1,300 at Christie's in March.*

which my mind does seem to have worked through the years poetically — doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of fusing them together, altering them, and making a kind of whole of them."

This was the case with the *Four Quartets*. In the summer of 1934, he and an American friend had visited Burnt Norton, a manor house in Gloucestershire built on the site of another house which had been destroyed by fire in the seventeenth century. The trip inspired him to write a long poem meditating on history and the passage of time ("Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future"), which was subsequently included in his *Collected Poems* 1909-1935 (1936).

Two of the other quartets — 'East Coker' and 'Little Gidding' — were also inspired by visits to historic places: the former to the Somerset village from which Eliot's ancestors

T. S. ELIOT

## OLD POSSUM'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS

NICOLAS BENTLEY  
drew the pictures



FABER AND FABER LIMITED  
24 Russell Square  
London

*This much-loved collection first appeared in 1939. 'Old Possum' was Ezra Pound's nickname for Eliot.*

had set out for America almost two centuries before; the latter, to the site of a religious community set up by the Anglican divine, Nicholas Ferrar, in the seventeenth century. The third quartet, 'The Dry Salvages', is named after a ledge of rock off Cape Ann, Massachusetts, to which Eliot used to sail as a boy.

He began the second poem, 'East Coker', in 1939, and it was while he was working on this that he had the idea for a sequence of four poems loosely based upon the scheme of the four seasons and the four elements. Every one to be in five sections, each section reflecting its counterparts in the other poems.

The final instalment, 'Little Gidding', was first published in the *New English Weekly* in October 1942 before being issued — like its two predecessors (both 1941) — in pamphlet-form by Faber & Faber later that same year. The first 'collected edition' appeared in America in 1943, its British counterpart following a year later.

Ackroyd has described the *Four Quartets* as "poetry married with public exhortation", but I can find precious little of either in them. The poems are too opaque and repetitive — not to say *personal* — to convey much to the casual (or even persistent) reader, and I can well understand why so many books have been written about this one work alone. Oh for the lamp-lit landscapes of his miraculous early verse, for Sweeney and wrinkle-breasted Tiresias!

### MISERY

Just before his death in January 1965, Eliot famously claimed that the best of his poetry had cost him dearly in experience, and there's no doubt that his life saw more than its fair share of misery. Perhaps its most unhappy component was his first marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood, which effectively ended in 1938 with her incarceration in a North London mental hospital.

Their relationship was analysed in Michael Hastings' play, *Tom and Viv*, and this has recently been made into a film starring Willem

*One of Nicolas Bentley's incomparable pictures from the illustrated edition, published the following year.*



Dafoe and Miranda Richardson. Having seen this film (and read the play), I have to say that I have very mixed feelings about both enterprises. You expect a certain amount of 'enhancement' when someone has dramatised the life of a famous person — human existence is a messy business, and audiences expect drama as well as historical reconstruction. But did Vivien *really* brandish a knife at Virginia Woolf and Edith Sitwell (it's known that she carried a toy one around with her), or pour melted chocolate through letter box of Faber & Faber, where her husband was Literary Adviser?

## FICTITIOUS

She apparently suffered from an undiagnosed hormone imbalance, and the film makes the perfectly valid point that the medical establishment was slow to appreciate the particular needs of women, but I wonder how Vivien would have felt about the inclusion of

completely fictitious scenes to drive home the point? Worst of all, the film shows Eliot as having been directly involved in Vivien's committal, and subsequently falling out with his adored mother-in-law because of it, when there is no evidence for either claim.

Having said that, it has all the virtues usually to be found in a quality British film: an excellent script, superb camerawork and, above all, splendid acting. Willem Dafoe could hardly look less like Eliot (much too Germanic), and Nickolas Grace (Anthony Blanche in *Brideshead Revisited*) is also miscast as Bertrand Russell, but Miranda Richardson is predictably brilliant as Vivien. However, for me the honours go to Rosemary Harris



T. S. Eliot, photographed in 1956 in the offices of Faber & Faber. © Ida Kar

as Vivien's mother, giving the sort of performance that could make the mother-in-law joke a thing of the past. Do see this movie, but read Ackroyd's biography first so that you don't get misled by its excesses.

Perhaps the most moving moment in the film comes when Eliot says his final farewells to his rather dim brother-in-law, Maurice. "Well, goodbye," mutters Maurice, his upper lip all-a-tremble. "It's been splendid knowing you. Feel like I've touched history."

I wonder why this is so affecting? Is it because of Maurice's obvious unfitness to pass judgement in these matters? Or because it reminds us of Eliot's desperate — at times even comic — attempts to become English? I

suspect that it's a bit of both, that the moment — with its great tenderness and yet complete lack of intimacy — highlights the vast gulf between the two men. Eliot apparently made great efforts to bridge that gulf in his later poems, but it is through the sublime verse of his youth and early adulthood that he truly speaks to everyman.

My thanks to Ulysses Books of Museum Street and Christie's South Kensington for the loan of books used to illustrate this feature.

*The film, Tom and Viv, opens at selected cinemas across the country on 15th April. Michael Hastings' play was reissued in paperback by Penguin on 31st March (£4.99)*

## T.S. ELIOT

### UK BIBLIOGRAPHY OF POETRY TITLES

A guide to current values of first editions in Very Good condition without/with dustjackets. U.S. editions are given only where there is no U.K. equivalent or where they precede their U.K. equivalents.

PRUFROCK AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS (wrappers) (The Egoist Ltd, 1917)	£2,000-£4,000+
POEMS (wrappers) (The Hogarth Press, 1919)	£3,000-£5,000+
ARA VOS PREC (boards; decorated by E. A. Wadsworth) (The Ovid Press, [1920])	£500-£1,000+
THE WASTE LAND (Boni & Liveright, U.S., 1922)	£800-£1,500+ (£2,000-£3,000+)
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POEMS 1909-1925 (Faber & Gwyer, MCMXXV [1925])	£50-£80 (£150-£200)
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('The Ariel Poems, No.8' [Faber & Gwyer], [1925])	£30-£40
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('The Ariel Poems, No.8' [Faber & Gwyer], [1925])	£200-£250
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('The Ariel Poems, No.16' [Faber & Gwyer], [1928])	£25-£35
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ASH-WEDNESDAY (edition limited to 600 numbered copies, signed by the author; issued in cellophane dustjacket and cardboard case) (Faber & Faber/The Fountain Press, New York, 1930)	£300-£500
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ANABASIS: A Poem by St.-J. Perse (translated by T.S.E.) (Faber & Faber, 1930)	£20-£30 (£30-£50)
ditto. Limited Edition (edition limited to 350 copies, signed by the author; cellophane dustjacket; slipcase) (Faber & Faber, 1930)	£100-£150 (£150-£200)
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SWEENEY AGONISTES: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama (boards)	
(Faber & Faber, [1932])	£30-£40 (£50-£80)
TWO POEMS (edition limited to 22 numbered copies: five printed on Arches [1-5], five on Normandie [I-V], five on Bremen [a-e], five on Brussels parchment [A-E], and two on red Florentine [X & XX]; wrappers) ([Privately printed for Frederic Prokosch at the Cambridge University Press], 1935)	n/a
COLLECTED POEMS 1909-1935 (Faber & Faber, [1936])	£15-£20 (£30-£40)
OLD POSSUM'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS (illustrated by the author)	
(Faber & Faber, [1939])	£40-£60 (£100-£150)
ditto. Illustrated Edition (illustrated by Nicolas Bentley) (Faber & Faber, [1940])	£20-£30 (£80-£100)

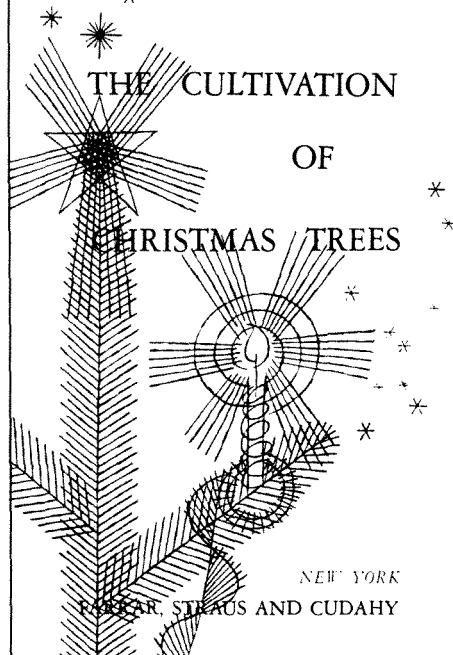


T. S. ELIOT

# THE DRY SALVAGES

FABER AND  
FABER

T. S. ELIOT



*The Dry Salvages* ([1941]) was the third of the *Four Quartets*. The Faber first edition sells for up to £20.

Enrico Arno's decorated title-page for the first U.S. edition of *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees*.

EAST COKER (magazine supplement; no binding/wrappers) ('The New English Weekly', 1940) .....	£40-£60
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FOUR QUARTETS (Harcourt, Brace and Company, U.S., [1943]) .....	£200-£300 (£400-£600+)
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THE UNDERGRADUATE POEMS (wrappers) ('The Harvard Advocate', [1949]) .....	£60-£100
POEMS WRITTEN IN EARLY YOUTH (edition limited to twelve numbered copies; boards) (Privately printed, Stockholm, 1950) .....	n/a
ditto. First Trade Edition (Faber & Faber, 1967) .....	£15-£20 (£20-£30)
THE CULTIVATION OF CHRISTMAS TREES (wrappers; in envelope; illustrated by David Jones) (Faber & Faber, 1954) .....	£10-£15 (£15-£20)
ditto. U.S. Edition (cloth; illustrated by Enrico Arno) (Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1956) .....	£8-£10 (£10-£15)
SELECTED POEMS (Faber & Faber, 1954) .....	£5-£8 (£10-£15)
SELECTED POEMS 1909-1962 (Faber & Faber, 1963) .....	£5-£8 (£10-£15)
COLLECTED POEMS 1909-1962 (Faber & Faber, 1963) .....	£10-£15 (£20-£30)
THE HOLLOW MEN (first separate U.K. edition) (School of Art Press, Oxford, 1964) .....	£100-£150+
THE COMPLETE POEMS AND PLAYS (Faber & Faber, 1968) .....	£10-£15 (£20-£30)
THE WASTE LAND: A FACSIMILE AND TRANSCRIPT (Faber & Faber, 1971) .....	£10-£15 (£15-£25)
ditto. Limited Edition (edition limited to 500 copies; in box) (Faber & Faber, [1971]) .....	£30-£50
GROWLTIGER'S LAST STAND (illustrated by Erol Le Cain) (Faber & Faber, 1986) .....	£4-£6 (£8-£10)

# COLLECTING WILD FLOWER BOOKS

BY A.R. JAMES

**U**ntil I developed an interest in wild flowers, like many town-dwellers, I had fooled myself into believing that little survived in late-twentieth century Britain beyond dandelions, buttercups and daisies. The wide and glorious variety displayed in any book on the subject seemed like a folk record of those good old days beyond recall. Any gardener, of course, could have told me what nonsense that was — as I quickly began to discover for myself when I moved out of town.

I had treated myself to a book on the subject, which included a number of coloured plates. Although I didn't believe that I would find many of the plants illustrated, I did at least begin to look for them — and was amazed at how many I *did* come across, almost anywhere, by spending just an hour or two looking carefully around. Of course, they had been there all the time but, unconscious of their existence, I had failed to see them.

## VARIETY

As soon as you begin to look for — and at — wild flowers, you cannot fail to be awed by their sheer variety and abundance, their hardiness (often against great odds), the engineering genius so obvious in their construction, and the amazing subtlety and beauty of their colours. Is a dandelion really yellow, a daisy really white? Look at them again, closely and preferably with a hand-lens. The effort of looking carefully at wild plants will be repaid a hundred-fold.

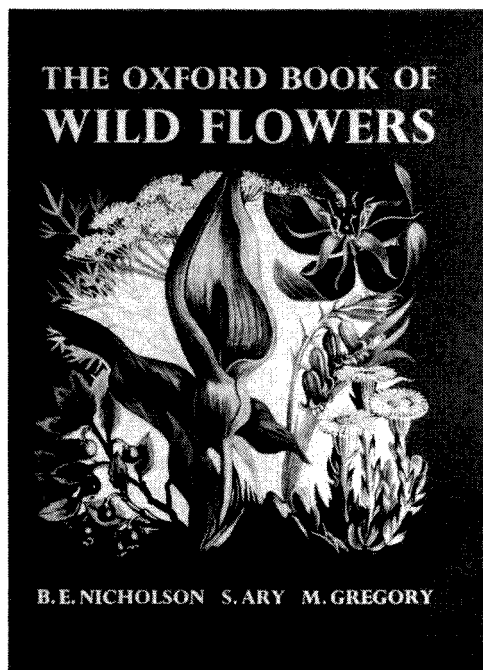
You will soon find that you need several books — one will not be enough, but you must start somewhere! Many hundreds of

titles are available (thousands, possibly) and here I shall be able to introduce you to only about a dozen, so I must be selective, and limit myself to those that I have found particularly helpful and enjoyable. I have divided my choices into three groups, reflecting the changing needs of the collector as he or she grows in experience.

Although the standard of colour printing and reproduction (particularly of details) in many modern books can sometimes be

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*The Oxford Book of Wild Flowers (1960) is an excellent introduction to this fascinating subject.*



superb, you should not ignore older works, which have unique charms of their own. Some of the more modern titles are vast in scope, and try to pack so many examples into a single, large volume that they can confuse almost as often as they enlighten. And where there are a large number of illustrations at the expense of the text, they can be frustrating to use just when you most need their help.

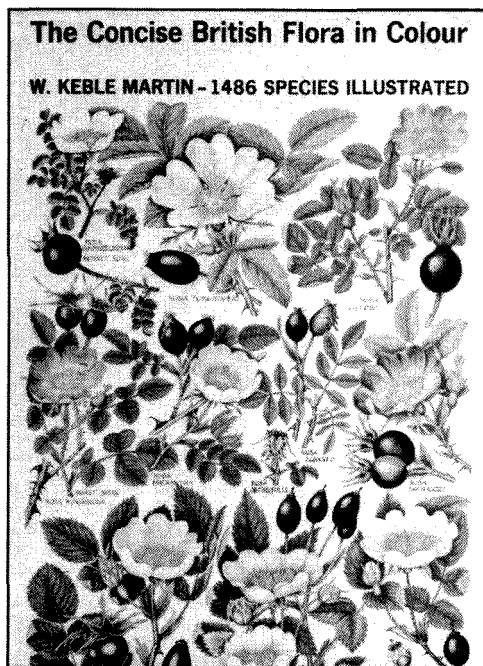
Personally, I should avoid bulky (and expensive) tomes until you have formed a clear idea of how your needs and interests are likely to develop. At first, you will need books with plenty of colour plates so that you can start to find your way around the subject, and it is these which form my first group of titles.

## EXCELLENT

An excellent place to begin is *The Oxford Book of Wild Flowers* by B. E. Nicholson, S. Ary and M. Gregory (Oxford University Press, 1960, and many subsequent editions). The specimens pictured, as well as being beautifully drawn, are arranged by colour rather than by family, to help those without botanical experience to find the appropriate illustration and match it with the living plant. Each colour plate includes several precise illustrations and faces a page of well-written explanatory text — a very convenient arrangement, although the book is a little too large to slip into the average pocket for use on a field trip.

This is also the case with *The Concise British Flora* by W. Keble Martin (Ebury Press/Michael Joseph, 1965), which is arranged in similar fashion, although generally with many more specimens to each colour plate and shorter, more technical descriptions of the plants. It illustrates some 1,486 species against only 550 in the Oxford book, despite the fact that it isn't much bigger or thicker. The latter is easier to use, but may not be sufficiently comprehensive once the reader has progressed beyond the basics — which means that you are likely to lust after both!

Keble Martin had a particularly interesting life, which is briefly described on the flaps of the book's dustjacket. However, the charm of the work is such that the reader is likely to want to know more than is there



*The Concise British Flora in Colour* (1965) illustrates a total of 1,486 native wild flowers!

revealed. Well worth finding is the author's autobiography, *Over The Hills...* (Michael Joseph, 1968), which explains in a most enjoyable way just how much devotion and hard, methodical work went into producing what is now undoubtedly a classic and timeless work in its field. Keble Martin was a clergyman and may in the fullness of time be proved to have done for wild flowers what his clerical predecessor, Gilbert White, did for Selborne!

Neither of the above can be called a handy, pocket-size volume and, should you feel the need of such a book, then I am afraid that I am going to have to disappoint you. My own experience is that none of the available options is without its faults: with some, the illustrations are not sufficiently clear; with others, the text is inadequate. In some cases, the whole is poorly arranged so that it can be difficult to match the illustrated specimen with the living plant (and particularly so with sub-species). Most try bravely to force a quart of information into a pint-sized volume, usually with only moderate success.



FIG. 1. Lady's Slipper Orchid. (1895) *Cypripedium calceolus*. (1895) *Cypripedium calceolus*.

# Wayside and Woodland Blossoms

A GUIDE TO BRITISH WILD FLOWERS

(THIRD SERIES)

WITH CLEAR DESCRIPTIONS OF 154 SPECIES  
INCLUDING ALL THE BRITISH ORCHIDS

BY

EDWARD STEP, F.L.S.

REVISED BY

A. B. JACKSON, A.L.S.

WITH

COLOURED FIGURES OF 64 SPECIES  
BY PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRODUCTIONS

AND  
119 TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS

INCLUDING

A PICTORIAL COLOUR KEY TO THE PLATES



FREDERICK WARNE & CO., LTD.  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

The title-page and frontispiece of the third volume of Edward Step's *Wayside and Woodland Blossoms* (1929).

However, one book which gives itself enough room to do the job properly is Edward Step's *Wayside & Woodland Blossoms*, one of the titles in Frederick Warne's excellent 'Wayside & Woodland' series (to be featured in a future issue of BMC). This work was originally issued in three, pocket-sized volumes (titled 'First', 'Second' and 'Third series' — published in 1895, 1896 and 1929 respectively), which were sturdy enough to withstand much heavy handling and the rigours of rain-soaked rambles through woods.

A revised, one-volume edition subsequently appeared under the title *Wild Flowers of the Wayside and Woodland* (1936). This was described as being 'up-dated', although it is difficult to imagine how Step's expert text or beautiful photographs could be improved upon. The revision is attributed to T. H. Scott and W. J. Stokoe.

This book has been reissued many times, in both its shorter and longer forms. It

enjoyed such a long and steady sale that copies of either version can still be picked up quite easily, even in their dustjackets. The pre-WW2 editions were so well and attractively bound that it seems a shame to cover them up, even with an original jacket!

## QUALITY

Regardless of whether or not you want a pocket-sized work to be able to take out and about with you, you should have this one for its sheer quality. And why bother with more than one pocket book when you have such an abundant choice of superb larger-format, but still handy, volumes?

All the books I've mentioned so far are chiefly useful because of their illustrations — the accompanying texts, whether concise or more comprehensive, are primarily intended to complement the pictures. But the enthusiast will want more informative books, in which the plates serve merely to

illustrate the text. These make up my second group.

If you have only a small amount of botanical knowledge, and want to know more about the structure of wild plants, and the function of their various parts — what, indeed, it is that makes them what they are, and explains their diversity and rich variety — then I must return you once again, and without apology, to the doyen of natural history writers, Edward Step (1855-1931; see BMC 94), whose skill at converting biological facts into vivid images remains unsurpassed.

## DETAILS

His *The Romance of Wild Flowers* (Warne, 1899) is, to quote the introduction, "not intended for botanists, but for unscientific flower-lovers. It makes no pretence to enabling the reader to identify plants but, having identified them by other aids . . . will invest them with greater interest . . . with details of their structure or behaviour." Step goes on to redeem that promise abundantly, providing deceptively simple-seeming descriptions of

each flower that are almost breath-taking in their clarity. He clearly explains the 'mechanics' of the various plants he considers, and shows that each one has a place in the broad scheme of nature, and a specific job to do.

The same author shortly afterwards produced another book which, I would maintain, is absolutely essential for everyone interested in the subject. This is *Wild Flowers Month by Month in their Natural Haunts*, first published in two volumes by Warne in 1905. The books were issued in beautiful art deco bindings — green linen-style cloth, gold lettering and decoration, and with a tinted photo onlay on the upper cover of each — as well as elegant dustjackets (which, alas!, are seldom found today). This edition is well worth seeking out, but more common is the undated, one-volume reissue, bound in durable but rather drab cloth, without decoration and with the minimum of gilding.

The latter was not actually published by Warne, but was issued under licence by a number of second-stream publishers, which means that it can be found under a variety of

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**PLEASE SEE PAGE 105 FOR GENERAL CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTANCE**

# Wild Flowers

## Month by Month

In their  
Natural Haunts



by  
**Edward Step F.L.S.**

*The rare dustjacket to Volume One of Step's **Wild Flowers Month by Month** (supplied: Lloyds of Kew).*

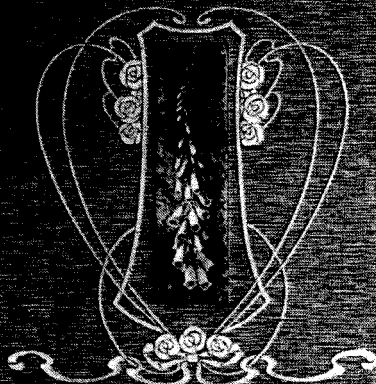
unusual imprints (although it is difficult to distinguish one edition from another). The text, with its delightful inset decorations, is unchanged from that of the two-volume version, but the full-page illustrations are arranged in a different order. The single-volume edition is the one to read at the meal-table or, perhaps, to lend, but Warne's original two-volume *tour de force* is the one (with hands suitably washed) to gloat over, as a miser croons to his hoard of gold. As you may have guessed, this work is high up on my short list of 'All-Time Favourite Books'!

It describes a series of rambles with the author through a variety of habitats, at various periods between March and September. It therefore provides a clear guide as to what to look out for at each time of year, where and how to find it, and how a plant progresses from shoot to flower to fruit. The narrative style is warm and friendly, and amply confirms the testimony of those who

# WILD FLOWERS

## MONTH BY MONTH

IN THEIR  
NATURAL  
HAUNTS



BY  
**EDWARD STEP F.L.S.**

*The front board of the same book. This title is probably the most successful British work on the subject.*

knew him, that Edward Step was the ideal companion and mentor for a trip to the country. This is one of those rare, truly user-friendly books that can be opened at any page and never fail to delight the reader.

Another admirable work is G. Clarke Nuttall's *Wild Flowers as They Grow*, first published by Cassell in seven volumes in 1911 and subsequently reissued in five volumes by The Waverley Book Co. (undated). This contains a series of interesting essays, each one on a single flowering plant, and embellished with a superb, full-page colour photograph from nature by H. Essenhugh Corke. It is excellent, both as a detailed reference work and as a book to browse through when you are confined indoors.

For those who can't find the first edition, the Waverley reissue makes an excellent substitute. The type is well-ledged, and the book is printed on uncalendered paper, which means that — somewhat unjustifiably — it

extends to five substantial volumes, which are nowadays seldom sold together as a set. However, individual volumes can be picked up with relative ease and, as each one is satisfyingly complete in itself, you don't have to wait until you have all five to appreciate them.

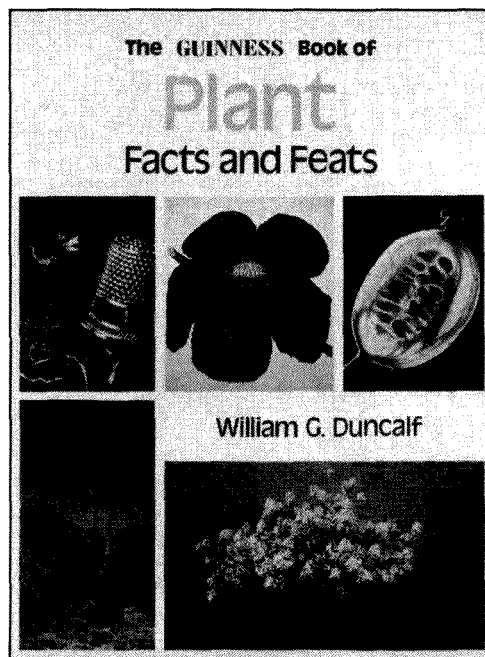
This edition's one weakness is that there is no overall index which means that, as the essays in each volume are randomly arranged, it can be irritating looking for a particular plant. In fact, it's worth spending an hour or so compiling one's own subject index to cover the four volumes. So attractive are the colour plates that, when you find a volume for sale, you are advised to take five minutes to check it for completeness before buying. *Caveat emptor!*

## SPECIFIC

As well as the two already mentioned, I should also like to deal with a third distinct group of titles: those books which look at specific aspects of this vast subject. Of course, which ones you concern yourself with is entirely a matter of personal taste. Some people will be interested in the uses to which plants can be put, whether for food, medicine or textiles; others in their origins, distribution and history, or perhaps in their relationships with other plants and habitats, or in their oddities and variations. Needless to say, there are books on every one of these topics.

Here, I can give you but a taster of the variety of titles on offer. The first thing you'll find as you begin to look is just what a rich field this is to explore. As you would expect, there are booksellers who specialise in botanical subjects, and their catalogues reveal an amazing diversity of works, as broad as it is deep. Of course, there are expensive rarities, just as in any area of book collecting, but a very comprehensive collection can be built up even if you decide not to pay more than £10 for any single title.

Here are just a few examples of specialist works, none of which is at all expensive. For an over-view of the oddities and extremes of the plant world, there is *The Guinness Book of Plant Facts and Feats* by William G. Duncalf (Guinness Superlatives Ltd., 1976). Far from being an interminable list of the biggest, smallest and weirdest of each type of green thing,



*The Guinness Book of Plant Facts and Feats* is a surprisingly thorough and well-organised work.

this work is divided up into a number of carefully chosen sections, each one fascinating in itself and offering much food for thought and further enquiry.

In *Pleasures of Wild Plants* (Museum Press, 1966), Audrey Wynne Hatfield concentrates on a selection of plants of special interest, as well as of particular beauty and charm. She traces their culinary applications, and gives a great deal of information about their uses in past ages, and about the myths and traditions associated with them.

## BENEFICIAL

In a companion volume, *Pleasures of Herbs* (Museum Press, 1964), the same author describes the beneficial effects of herbs, indicates how to grow them and to use them to flavour foods and drinks, and tells something of their historical associations.

The use of herbs as medicine is a subject older than mankind itself since we may be sure that animals took them — out of instinct — long before we did. The encyclopedic works

# PLEASURES OF WILD PLANTS



AUDREY WYNNE HATFIELD

*This book from 1966 looks at the myths and traditions surrounding certain important wild plants.*

of the old herbalists, Culpepper and Gerard (still in print, and available in paperback), purport to provide cures for almost every known complaint, as well as recipes for magical infusions that will help you accomplish your every dream, whether it be to grow taller or brainier, or to have your way with members of the opposite sex. These potions, I understand, do not come with the author's guarantee of efficacy!

More serious herbal works are nowadays much in demand. One well worth looking out for — once again, as much for the quality of its writing as for the information and advice it contains — is Edward Step's *Herbs of Healing*, first published by Hutchinson in 1926. Its rather dull-looking exterior conceals a mine of surprising information upon a whole range of common and easily-found wild flowers.

All the books that I have dealt with so far are well within the comprehension of the lay

reader without any scientific knowledge. However, this depth of treatment will not satisfy everyone, and the committed student will eventually find him- or herself wanting to know more.

Of course, there are a huge number of books that deal with the subject on a more profound level, including several titles in the popular 'New Naturalist Library' (see BMC 104). Many have been written by experts at Kew Gardens, and so include the fruits of the latest research. When you feel ready to stretch your knowledge of the subject, a good place to begin would be Patricia Lewis's *British Wild Flowers*, published by Hodder & Stoughton in 1958 as part of their 'Kew Series'.

Developing an interest in our wild plants should provide a number of fringe benefits. Above all, it will get you out into the fresh air of the open countryside, a pleasure in itself, and one which sometimes gets sadly overlooked by book collectors — and writers! I found, too, that it has had a lasting effect in sharply improving my powers of observation, not just when hunting for plants but in many other aspects of my life.

It has also heightened my perception and appreciation of colour and form, and re-awakened a fitting reverence for the awesome majesty of the natural creation that surrounds us all. William Blake spoke for me when he wrote of seeing "Heaven in a wild flower", for these widely-scattered jewels are filled with wonder for those who take the trouble to look closely at them.

*My thanks to Lloyds of Kew (081-940-2512) for the loan of the dustjacket to Edward Step's Wild Flowers Month by Month.*

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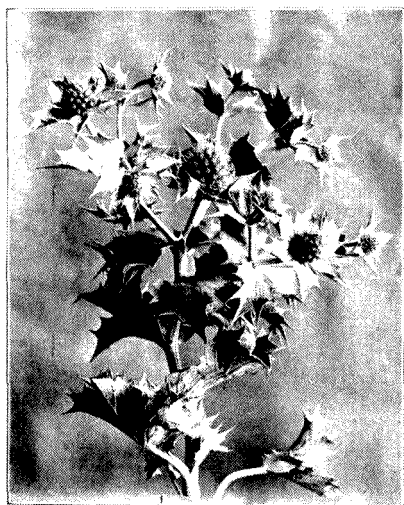
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Martin, W. Keble: OVER THE HILLS . . . (Michael Joseph, 1968)	£4-£6

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# Your Letters

If you have any comments or queries on any aspect of book collecting, please write to:  
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Answers will normally be given only on these pages, so please don't send an SAE.

## W. E. JOHNS

Dear Editor,

I was recently intrigued to find an article by Captain W. E. Johns in an issue of the magazine, *My Garden*. The article is entitled 'The Passing Show', and appears in Volume 27 of the bound edition of the publication, containing the issues from the period July-December 1943.

Can you tell me a little bit more about this magazine, and confirm that this is the same W. E. Johns who wrote the 'Biggles' books? I can't find any reference to his horticultural activities in your past articles on him! M. Elloway, Cornwall.

*My Garden*, edited by Theo. A. Stephens, began publication in January 1934. W. E. Johns was an enthusiastic gardener and, as the *My Garden* offices were very close to those of *Popular Flying*, the aviation magazine which Johns edited, it was inevitable that he should take an interest in Stephens' publication and come to know the man himself. Noting Johns' enthusiasm for the subject, Stephens asked him to write for *My Garden*, and the first of many short gardening articles by Johns duly appeared in the issue for May 1936.

In January 1937, Johns began a regular column for the magazine entitled 'The Passing Show', which he continued for eight years, up until the end of 1944. *My Garden* ceased publication in December 1951, and it was only fitting that W. E. Johns, who had had a long association with the title, should write a short piece for that final issue.

In September 1937, Stephens published an edited collection of Johns' early articles for the magazine under the title, *The Passing Show: A Garden Diary by an Amateur Gardener*. This book has the added attraction of a number of black-and-white drawings by Howard Leigh, who contributed many illustrations to the 'Biggles' books in the 1930s. In their biography, *Biggles! The Life Story of Capt. W. E. Johns* (Veloce, 1993), Peter Berresford Ellis and Jennifer Schofield wrote of this work: "Johns' gardening book certainly has a delightfully light touch. It is unique amongst Johns' writings in showing so clearly his love of beauty and his imagination at its gentlest."

Copies of *The Passing Show* are still fairly common, even signed ones. In fact, it must rank as the most signed of Johns' books — it would almost be true to say that unsigned copies are harder to find than signed ones! My guess is that an unsigned copy — Very Good in dustjacket — would be worth between £10 and £20 today, although a specialist dealer might expect more.

Those who want to know more about Johns' 'horticultural activities' should consult David Welch's article, 'Captain W. E. Johns: Gardener', published in the February 1989 issue of *The Garden*.

## MARX BROTHERS

Dear Editor,

I enjoyed A. J. Saunders' article on the Marx Brothers in the March issue of BMC (No.120), but would like to point out a few omissions and errors.

The list of books by Groucho himself should also have included *The Secret Word is Groucho*, which he co-wrote with Hector Arce. This work, which deals mainly with his popular TV show, *You Bet Your Life*, was first published in the United States by G. P. Putnam in 1976, and was issued in paperback by Berkley the following year. Arce also wrote what might be regarded as Groucho's 'official biography', *Groucho*, which Putnam brought out in 1979. Neither of these books was ever published in the U.K.

To further confuse the issue, another book called *The Secret Word is Groucho* appeared in 1993, this time written by Sally Presley-Rippingale and John E. Ballow (the latter was Groucho's personal chef for the

last years of his life). This work, published in the United States by Dorrance Publishing Company and distributed in this country, covers in some depth Groucho's relationship with Erin Fleming who — whatever her shortcomings — at least revived his career.

For completists, I believe that Groucho's Broadway play, *Time for Elizabeth* — written with Norman Krasna in 1948 — was published by Samuel French, and that his first book, *Beds*, was reissued in a revised version in the 1970s. I also recall seeing a tie-in edition of *A Night in Casablanca*, published at the time of the film's release.

Mr. Saunders is right in saying that Chico never wrote an autobiography, but his daughter did pen a memoir, entitled *Growing Up with Chico*. This was first published in the U.S. by Prentice-Hall in 1980, and was reprinted six years later by Limelight Editions, New York. It provides a fascinating insight into Chico's wayward personality.

In 1974, Richard Anobile followed up his 'collection of visual and verbal gems', *Why a Duck*, with *Hooray for Captain Spaulding*, which is devoted to the Marxes' classic 1930 film, *Animal Crackers*. Michael Pounton, London.

## MYSTERY SOLVED?

Dear Editor,

I've just read the letter from Janet Cleaves in BMC 121 ('Mystery') and think that I can help. The book she describes sounds like Philip MacDonald's *Murder Gone Mad*, which was first published in 1931.

In MacDonald's novel, the murderer *does* send notes written on yellow paper, and the police *do* keep watch on the town's letter-boxes. However, the murderer is *not* the postman, as Ms. Cleaves suggests! I shan't reveal who it was, as that would ruin the story for her and your readers. The 'name detective' is Superintendent Arnold Pike.

Philip MacDonald (1899-1981) also wrote *The Noose*, *The Rasp* and *R.I.P.*, the last of which is really ghoulish! *Murder Gone Mad* was included in John Dickson Carr's list of the ten best detective novels of all time. Paddy Hancock, Wirral.

# Small Ads

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30	27	22	13	2
25	22	18	10	1.50
20	17	15	8	1
15	13	11	7	1
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**MINT:** This means that the book is in perfect condition. It is complete with its dust-wrapper and is impossible to tell from a new copy. **DUSTJACKET:** as new.

**FINE:** The book appears to be in excellent condition. Closer examination, however, will show evidence of ownership and storage. There may also be a small inscription to the previous owner, but generally the book is in near perfect condition. **DUSTJACKET:** as new but with very slight rubbing on the corners.

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**GOOD:** It is obvious that the book is second-hand. However, apart from minor faults, it must always be assumed that books in Good condition are complete in all respects, unless described otherwise. **DUSTJACKET:** fairly clean with almost perfect colouring, but suffering from marks, slight creasing and other signs of wear. Most of the edges are rubbed or have very small tears in them.

**POOR:** A book in this category is in really bad condition. It may be warped, the preliminary pages may be missing, and the spine irreparably damaged. The text is complete but the book is really only suitable to read. **DUSTJACKET:** tatty and grubby, and may well be marked, creased or torn.



No.122 MAY '94

# BOOK AND MAGAZINE COLLECTOR

*The frontispiece to Lord  
Dunsany's 1936 novel, **My  
Talks with Dean Spanley**,  
drawn by Sidney H. Sime.*

